

The Profession

Herbert A. Simon Testimony on the Social Sciences: Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Technology, September 29, 1989

In scheduling this hearing, the Committee has expressed some interest in observations on the strengths and weaknesses of the social sciences. I have already commented on the gradually enlarging role of the social sciences in the national structure for providing science advice on issues of public policy. What about the capability of these sciences for providing the advice that is needed?

It is hard for me to avoid advocacy, but if some of my remarks sound self serving, it is because they rest on a lifelong belief that the social sciences have much to contribute to our society, and could contribute much more than they do if they were supported at a more adequate level. I can greatly abridge my comments by referring you to the admirable report on achievements and opportunities in the behavioral and social sciences recently prepared by a committee of the National Research Council (Gerstein, Luce, Smelser and Sperlich, editors, *The Behavioral and Social Sciences*, Washington: National Academy Press, 1988).

It is misleading to talk about “hard” and “soft” sciences. In the physical sciences, classical mechanics is hard, but meteorology (e.g., the greenhouse effect) and the theory of high-temperature superconductivity or low-temperature fusion can be (as recent news stories tell us) exceedingly soft. Similarly, in the social sciences, knowledge about the operation of competitive markets or the capacity of human short-term memory is quite hard; but knowledge about how businessmen and consumers form expectations about the future, or about motivations surrounding drug usage can be quite soft.

Since science is always pushing its frontiers, it is always leaving the

hard areas behind—they become “common sense”—and pushing into the soft areas. A science that is hard all the way through is a poor place to do research. In cognitive psychology, for example, thirty years ago we were trying to understand and explain how human beings are able to solve simple puzzles. Today, we think we understand those processes pretty well, so we are researching on how human beings make scientific discoveries. The theory of puzzle solving is hard science, the theory of scientific discovery is still softish science.

To be suitable for research, it is not enough that an area be soft; there should also be some tools for tackling it—some ideas about the next step. Often data, or ways of getting them, are the key. Inadequacy of basic data is the most serious impediment to social science research in most domains today, and the data are not going to become noticeably better without substantial increases in the level of research funding.

Economics, sociology, and political science need to collect, on a more or less continuous basis, more facts about the way in which our society operates, and the ways in which its human actors behave. Psychology needs increased opportunities to study behavior in the laboratory, and organization theory and business economics need more extensive and detailed observation of what goes on daily in the decision-making work of business firms and government organizations. We particularly need better data about how people and institutions change over time: longitudinal data. I would count sophistication in building and applying theories as among the great strengths of the social sciences today, and the lack of adequate data as among the

great weaknesses.

Let me conclude with a comment on research in an area where all of you are expert, and where you know from your own experiences that the “common sense” of media and public can be wholly misleading. Government has a bad press in our society. We praise our democratic institutions, but we can find nothing good to say about politics. There is little realization that democracy and politics are the reverse sides of the same coin—that a democratic society is a society governed by advocacy, negotiation, consensus building, compromise.

One important area of research in political science is the study of political institutions: building up a realistic picture of how they actually operate and how they would operate if various structural changes were made in them. Even at the modest level of continuing research in this area, political scientists are able to provide a valuable corrective to the stereotyped views of government and politics that are widely current.

They can account for the structure of American political parties—their conglomerate nature and lack of ideological “purity.” They can make reasonably accurate assessments of the effect of registration requirements on non-voting. They can analyze the recruitment of young talent to careers in politics and government. They can throw light on how the political agenda is set.

In sum, they can help us know ourselves as citizens and as actors in the political arena; can provide the realistic knowledge of ourselves that is essential if we are to preserve and improve the democratic institutions that are the foundation of our national life. Surely that knowledge repays many times the small investment—a few million dollars at most

—that the Federal government makes each year in basic research in political science.

The Nature of Contemporary Political Science: A Roundtable Discussion

Kristen Monroe, Gabriel Almond, John Gunnell, Ian Shapiro, George Graham, Benjamin Barber, Kenneth Shepsle, and Joseph Cropsey

Kristen Monroe

University of California, Irvine

What is the nature of contemporary political science? What shared concerns bind us together as a discipline, providing a common definition and direction to our intellectual enterprise? These questions were on my mind as I organized the section on formal and normative political theory for the 1989 APSA meetings. Initially, I had wanted to sponsor a panel to address the nature of formal and normative theory. I knew I was a bit uncertain about the precise nature of these fields and sensed that other scholars shared my desire for greater clarity. Then I read Gabriel Almond's "Separate Tables" (*PS: Political Science and Politics*, 1988). The surprisingly diverse and intense reaction this article generated in the profession suggested the confusion extended beyond my own subfield and into the discipline as a whole. All of this provided the impetus for the round table whose discussion is summarized below.

Since Almond's article argues there is a methodological separateness that limits us as a discipline, I tried to choose panel discussants to reflect the disparate parts of political science. I spoke with each panelist in advance and, drawing on their suggestions, I constructed and circulated a few key questions around which our discussion would be organized. As is obvious in the following remarks, panelists expressed quite different views, but each participant touched on the following questions in some way: Is there a core to contemporary political science? If so, what is it? If not, does its absence

About the Author

Herbert A. Simon of Carnegie Mellon University received the APSA's James Madison Award in 1983. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1978.

matter? Should there be a core? And how important is communication among the different branches of political science?

Each panelist made a brief statement on this topic, focusing on these particular questions. Their remarks are reprinted below, with their per-

Is there a central core to political science? Yes.

mission, and in the hope that such discussion may foster our common intellectual vitality.

My own thoughts on these questions can be expressed succinctly. Is there a central core to political science? Yes. What is it? For me, it's a little bit like love. I know it. I recognize it when I see it. I respond to it with great excitement and a feeling of being alive. And I'm prepared to follow it wherever it leads me intellectually. But it's still hard to define. For most of my early professional life, I would have said that the central core had something to do with power and influence. After spending the last five years talking to David Easton and Harry Eckstein, I would also now include a consideration of the authoritative allocation of values. (This concept was articulated in another form by Lucian Pye in his 1989 Presidential address.) Finally, my deep and enduring intellectual friendship with Joseph Cropsey prompts me to add a third component for our discipline to consider: the proper and the actual relationship of the individual to the society in which he or she lives.

Does the absence of a central core matter? Can we produce good, competent work by just replicating what we've traditionally done and without the kind of periodic, continual, and even heated discussion and debate over the proper nature of our common enterprise? It's possible that without such periodic intellectual shocks we can produce competent work, but such work will remain rather banal. Is such work what most of us would call good? Probably not.

Finally, is it necessary to talk to each other, to be forced to table-hop, in Almond's metaphor? Yes, I think it is. Some shared vocabulary probably is necessary for the most fruitful exchange. Certainly given the vast amount of literature existing in any subfield in the discipline, specialization is inevitable, if only to produce a common set of concepts in which to converse and disagree. But it is certainly more interesting to talk with people who are different. It gives a vitality and excitement to our work which is otherwise lacking. It forces us to rethink the basic assumptions and preconceptions which drive our individual research. It keeps us intellectually young and makes us alive. And that, I suspect for most of us, is the main reason we do this job.

Gabriel Almond *Stanford University*

In my recent sermons to the profession, I have felt a bit like a minister or rabbi of a rich congregation in a prosperous season, reminding his parishioners of their mortality and their spiritual obligations. We have grown enormously, five-fold, during the course of my own professional career. We have acquired powerful skills, proliferated subdisciplines, and have extended our influence all over the world, most significantly in the Communist-Marxist-Leninist world. My most striking and moving experience during my 1989 teaching stint in the Soviet Union was my encounters with the members of Chairs in Scientific Communism at the universities in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. With almost no exception, they were quite disenchanted with Marxism-Leninism