

# The Profession

## Two Ways to Political Science: Critical and Descriptive\*

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In 1893, 100 years ago, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famed paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," to an academic gathering. The historical occasion for Turner's address was the official closing of the frontier on government-issued maps.

It may be that in our time those of us who are attuned will witness a comparable withdrawal of a frontier, one peculiar to our profession, a barrier to a certain kind of study and research. It may be that in coming decades we will see a sudden flood tide of pioneers pursuing a new kind of political science focussed specifically on the American political condition.

Since the publication in 1908 of A. F. Bentley's *The Process of Government*—and certainly across the whole of my lifetime—we have been told to stay away from this new kind of political science. More exactly, this new kind of political science was said to be a very old-fashioned kind that right-thinking, career-oriented, young political scientists would not dream of "mustifying" themselves in. Bentley's political science was where the rewards were.

But change is in the air. All over the world, political futures are exceedingly murky even as vast dislocations occur under people's feet. In the United States, we appear stuck, but clearly teetering. In consequence, questions of a sort not heard in decades are now being asked. To answer them, barriers are going to have to come down and frontiers will have to be crossed.

If anything like this scenario is correct, we had best know what we are about. The thesis of this paper

is that the Bentley tradition—quasi-scientific, behavioral, descriptive—valuable as it may have been, has hit a dead end. The time has come, especially in the study of American politics, for a revival, or, perhaps, a reinvention, of a deliberately philosophical political science that can ask and answer without embarrassment or confusion the host of new questions now being posed by the rush of current events.

To be explicit: as yet, there is very little to suggest a developing interest in philosophical political science in our profession. You can search in vain for it in the program statements of next year's APSA convention. More definitively, there is no more evidence of it in the second edition, just published, of Ada Finifter's *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* than there was in the first edition ten years ago. Much the same could be said of such books as Oliver Walter's *Political Scientists at Work*, Robert Dahl's *Modern Political Analysis*, Kenneth Hoover's *The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking*,<sup>1</sup> or Bernard Susser's *Approaches to the Study of Politics*. So let me begin my exposition with a very simple allegory.

Imagine a group of well-funded scholars studying triangles, actual triangles of every size and type, wherever they might be found, including bent and broken triangles. Suppose further that these scholars, like the denizens of Plato's cave, were bound by the head and the hand to studying always and only apparent triangles, measurable and countable triangles. If we assume these scholars to be relentless, they would in time develop a huge data base from which they

could develop averages and norms and also infer predictions of various sorts (Plato 1941, 227–31). They might have awards for those who had special skills in these matters, and certainly they would heap honors on the member of their group who discovered, after examining every triangle in the data base that the sum of the angles in actual, visible, and feelable triangles tends toward an equilibrium of 180°.

A strange sort of scholars, you say.

Like ourselves, I say. Substitute the phrase, "U.S. presidents" for "triangles," and you will get a clear hint of what larger matters I am driving at. But stay with my triangle scholars a moment more. From the philosophical perspective I am developing, their central difficulty is with apprehending and defining the pure concept of triangularity. There are two points to be made here.

First, their fascination with the appearance of particulars, is based on their commitment to a metaphysics of sensibility. To leave Plato's cave, to go up and cross his line into what he called the intelligible world is for these scholars to enter the domain of fantasy. Behavioral appearance in the sensible world is for them the test of reality. And the weight of these attitudes is for them established by the admission of their opponents that access to the intelligible world is gained by sheer intuition from a single, perhaps even a very imperfect example, without need to consult arduously a huge data base. No wonder, therefore, say these scholars, that Plato's intelligible world has been long since abandoned to Hegelians, sundry religionists, and so forth.

But, second, a study of triangles not poised directly on a concept of triangularity which is apprehendable only by the mind and held to be more “real” than any actual triangle is a poor sort of geometry. For all the plenitude of its descriptive powers, it cannot be a critical geometry. It cannot examine necessary relationships. It has no criteria by which to distinguish between good and bad, better or worse. Most important, it has no ground from which to launch a full scale inquiry into the validity and significance of its subject matter (should we be studying triangles at all rather than squares?).

On the basis of this allegory, I affirm that a study of America’s experience with, for example, its presidents, that is not based centrally on a rarified conception of the presidential office as apprehended ultimately by an *intuition* from the facts—and, moreover, a study that does not place this concept of the presidential office in the context of an equally rarified conception of the American polity as a liberal democracy—is a political science not doing the job that current events now demand of it.

Allegories may illuminate, but they do not justify. More specifically, the allegory just recited begs major questions, most notably, ontological questions about the relative “reality” of our political concepts, and epistemological questions about how we may apprehend them in verifiable ways.

Modern political science in 1908 turned to Bentley as to a breath of fresh air, and with good reason. In style and substance like Marxists, Bentley promised to cut through the meaningless rhetoric and linguistic twaddle of both politicians and philosophers and get to the heart of the matter: the operational core of political life. That he located in “groups” pursuing “interests,” their own. And, Bentley added, if you did not know what their “interests” were, watch their activity, for he insisted, activity indicated interest and, unfailingly, interest called forth activity. There was the reality test.

At the time Bentley was writing and publishing his most famous

book, he was working not as an academic but as a newspaper man in Chicago. There runs through his observations and especially his illustrations a city-desk cynicism that must have powerfully attracted the political scientists of his day bored with traditional studies of formal institutions mandated only by equally formal philosophical speculations and law. But hindsight prompts us to see two difficulties that Bentley’s approach left in its wake.

One was, what are we to make of all that superficial “dross,” as he called it, through which we cut on our way to reality? If, most importantly, politicians are hiding behind it, who are they hiding from, and what persuades them that the rhetoric they drape themselves with will effectively do the job? Are we touching on compulsions here that are politically significant? We shall return to these questions.

Bentley’s second difficulty is more subtle and has been best exposed by Norman Jacobson in an essay, “Political Science and Political Education,” which should have been judged seminal had anyone bothered to be inseminated by it. Jacobson argued that the reason Bentley’s approach worked so well—or at least appeared to work so well—was that it operated within a concealed circularity.

Bentley’s political science—as he himself readily admitted—was not new. It was in fact, Jacobson noted, identical to James Madison’s. But Madison had turned his into a constitution, a constitution that the American people in turn not only adopted but also allowed to dictate and mold their political behavior. It became, in a word, their operative ideology, and, by living it, they became at once good specimens and good citizens. The constitution itself became a great self-fulfilling prophecy.

Can we turn back from Jacobson’s insight into the second of Bentley’s difficulties to an explanation of his first? That is possible if we address what Bentley regarded as discardable dross as significant political fact and ask, as Jacobson did before, does it serve an impor-

tant ideological need, albeit a little studied and deeply concealed one?

What most strongly suggests this possibility is the now increasingly recognized need of governments to be legitimated, as the very price of their being, and often by processes and institutions sharply distinct from those by which they operationally govern. Moreover, recently, it has become obvious and much discussed in some quarters, that governments such as Madison’s are not self-legitimizing, and that even the founders themselves were aware that their handiwork would not endure unless it was sustained by ideological appeals transcending the self-interest of its citizens in groups or as individuals (Sinopoli 1992). Hence, Bentley’s dross-like rhetoric is not the mere misleading decoration he thought; it is America’s myth, its “civil religion” (Bellah 1967, 1992) without the fervent presence of which no American polity could operate.

Exploring the dogmatic content of America’s civil religion is a fascinating project but well beyond the scope of this paper. Our business must stay with making explicit the ontological assumption that underlies both Jacobson’s perception of the ideological character of Bentley’s methodology and our perception of the need for governmental mythic legitimization. That assumption is—in direct contradiction to Bentley’s implicit behavioralism—that the reality of politics is ideal, that is, conceptual.

The origins of this interpretation, for all its idealism, is not Platonic or any kindred “realism” about innate ideas. Rather it is a nominalism that began with Kant’s understanding of human experience.<sup>2</sup>

Kant’s fundamental insight was that ideas made experience possible. Ideas make the mere experience of observation possible: if I have some idea of what a tree is, I can experience an actual tree when I see it. Ideas make action experience possible: if I have some idea of what a taxi is, I can go into the street and flag one down. Most importantly, ideas make social action and cohesion possible: if a group of us share a clear idea of what the game of “Red Light” is (many peo-

ple don't) and a determination to play it, we can become a Red Light Game society. Comparably, if it can be shown that Americans do not, in their operative political vocabulary, share a clear understanding of "revolution" as a socially creative, transforming process, they are not going to have one, not for a hundred years of trying.

Crucial to this discussion is the notion that the concepts that make experience possible are relatively more "real" than the particular experiences they create. Those experiences are all ephemeral and pass away with time; the ideas that structure, give meaning, and make possible those experiences persist as long as they are held in the mind and can be used without change again and again. Thus, the concept of triangularity is infinitely more "real" than even the most solid of actual triangles; the concept of the presidential office persists as actual presidents come and go.

The relative reality of concepts is crucial to our discussion for two reasons. First, as scholars, obviously, we are more interested in the more real than the less real. But this is a deceptively simple point. No one should underestimate what is being said here. The call is for a wholesale shift of emphasis from observable behavior to the ideas that structure behavior. The call is for the systematic study of the ideas by which political actors situate themselves and conduct themselves in their worlds of political experience as *they* understand it. And it is all the more important to stress this shift of focus to ideas as the goal of political studies, because we ourselves will be arguing momentarily that even so we must *begin* our approach to that goal by observing the actual behavior of political actors.

Second, the reality of political concepts relative to the political experience they make possible forces us to recognize that political actors and the concepts by which they situate and define themselves can only be understood relationally, that is, as internally related. They have meaning only as they are defined in terms of and for each other. The behavioral approach to

the study of politics tends inevitably not only to see the actual individual as the fundamental unit of political life; it also tends to see that individual and his or her characteristics in isolation, this president and then that one, this citizen and then that one, as if they were atoms in a pile. Shifting the focus to the concepts by which actors are situated and defined in the context of a larger whole forces us to contextualize our understandings of them. The citizen is not just the possessor of certain rights and preferences; he/she must be understood as member of and in the political process.

More particularly, if, as I have argued elsewhere [Roelofs 1992a], the presidential office has a prime and largely charismatic role to promulgate the nation's legitimizing myth, what would we make of the fact that nine out of ten actual presidents have failed in this role miserably? Would that "norm" of actual behavior compel us to redefine the "norm" of the office as defined in concept? Not at all. In concept, the presidential office is defined largely in terms of its relationship to other elements in the political system. Specifically, the presidency's charismatic role is defined in terms of the expectations of the American people, in terms of what they hope for from any occupant. Therefore, in any history of the office, the consistent disappointment of the American people with their presidents must be a major ingredient. In that light, the people's conceptual understanding of the office is more "real" than the behavior of even nine out of ten of its occupants.

We can pull together these ontological observations of what is at least relatively "real" in politics by asking this question: is the political science being recommended here "empirical"? The answer is an emphatic affirmative. The title of David Easton's first famous book was *The Political System*. The referent of that phrase for him (most of the time) was a set of ideas, a theory, in his mind by the use of which he could account for a body of evidence before him. The evidence he had was empirical, the

systematic result of direct observation. His theory, however, was speculation, an invention in his mind. The political science being brought forward here, in contrast, is empirical through and through. It seeks to determine the actual concepts by which actual people determine their actual behavior in actual historical circumstances. It invents nothing.

That comment brings us squarely to the epistemological problem: how in politics are we to apprehend with accuracy and precision the actual concepts political actors use to make their political lives not only possible but ongoing? The short answer is, by intuition. The longer answer is considerably more complicated, but in no way contradicts the short answer.

"Intuition," as was indicated earlier, is not a hurrah-word in contemporary political science. For most scholars, it conveys a seat-of-your-pants abandon to think what you like. No doubt the term, and the faculty it denotes, has often been abused. But we are all compelled to use something like this faculty some of the time. Even our miserable students of actual triangles—even if they confine themselves to saying, "I can't define the term, but I know one when I see one"—are making a tiny admission that at some point they had made the leap from sensing particulars to conceptualizing nonimaginable universals apprehendable only by the mind. Moreover, our intuitive faculty, like any other, can be used with discretion and discipline.

For Kant, to do a transcendental analytic, to lay open the concepts that make experience possible, required absolutely beginning with an actual experience. In the classic example, to understand the concept of "space," begin with an actual apple. Then, by a process of phenomenological reduction, remove ("critique") one after another of its phenomenal characteristics (weight, color, taste, smell, etc.) until nothing is left and we are staring at (grasping) the concept of (pure) space. But note in that last step, there is still, however small, a leap, a shift from sensing data to the

apprehension of a concept—an intuition.

I submit that something like Kant's techniques of transcendental analysis could and should have widespread use in especially the study of American politics. Take any two or three American presidents—virtually any of them will do the job, just as we can intuit the (pure) concept of circularity from a quick look at the new moon or even a badly bent penny. But to be on the safe side, pick presidents from different historical periods, and those, too, that appear to have had multifaceted conceptions of their office. Do a phenomenological reduction on each of them and compare the results.

Instructive as these results, individually and collectively, might be, they are not enough to define the reality of the presidential office. At best, they are an accurate measure of what occupants of the office had in mind as they practiced their craft. Regularly, as they go along, they have had to soften or even change their views. They, as we sometimes put it, bump up against the "reality" that they are not the only ones in town with relevant views on what it means to be president. To these others, the president and his self-conception are, as we argued before, internally related. To get the required, composite, contextualized conception of the office, we must do a series of transcendental analytics all along the lines of relationship between the presidency and all the other actors in his shared field of meaning.

The result of these more extended studies will be a collective impression, complex, extensive, and studded with points of indefiniteness and ambiguity. Can we supplement our study of it with materials drawn from the reflections of scholars or even Bentley's dross, the rhetoric of politicians, and the twaddle of philosophers? That material has its political significance—but as guides to definition of the reality of offices, it is highly unreliable. In the Kantian perspective, actual experience is the place to start—because that is where the ideas (relatively real concepts) are.

I suspect strongly that research

on the American presidency conducted along the lines suggested here would show that the central concepts of that office have been remarkably static, and were essentially fixed by no later than the time of Jefferson. Whatever variations and developments there have been in the concept since have been minor or concerned with clarifications. Behavioralist historians might find that conclusion absurd, and would surely point to the wide differences between various presidencies, particularly between the early ones and the more recent ones. To this we could reply that people who study triangles no doubt find a comparable variety in their subject matter—even as the concept of triangularity remains fixed in infinity.

In sum, this is the methodology I am recommending. Can we specify the kinds of questions it might ask, especially as compared to the questions being pressed upon us by the race of current events?

One thing should be admitted at the outset. This methodology will not be good at making predictions. It may be able with occasional accuracy to *anticipate* (sic!) what political actors will do, based on our knowledge of their intentions in office. But guessing about how things will turn out in fact is a goal belonging to a methodology of an altogether different genre. The central goal of the methodology being advanced here is to understand with accuracy and precision the *meaning* of situations, to interpret and evaluate what people are doing—or, at least, trying to do in their institutionalized environments.

In this light, the kinds of questions this methodology might put to especially the study of American politics go along the following lines.<sup>3</sup>

In the first place, as a critical philosophic political science, it would attempt to specify in concept the tasks that the American political system, both explicitly and implicitly, sets for itself. The findings here would surely point to paradox piled upon ambiguity piled on flat-out contradiction. In general terms, that conclusion is well known. But a philosophical political science

dedicated to thinking closely about ideas operative in the mind should be able to specify with some precision the exact character of these clashes in values and outlooks. Furthermore, it should be able to point to the institutions, both formal and informal, which have been created to sustain these values and outlooks in their clashes with each other, and the kinds and extents of the rights and powers that have accrued to these institutional supports.

The end result of such researches should be a comprehensive and yet well-detailed view of the American polity as a systematic whole of intentions and prescribed practice, however deeply bifurcated and at times set against itself. It would be, in a word, a single map, an exposure, of the American political "mind," as that has been developed, defined, and sustained by tradition and social acculturation and trust. In contrast, a merely behavioral approach, because of its focus on sensible behavior, could not grasp the extent or the paradoxical unity (internal inter-relatedness) of the American political system.

Next, a critical political science could estimate the costs and consequences of the American political system, not as these appear in fact, but rather as they appear as the near inevitable consequences, the logical end points of a system laid out as this one has been. It would fasten attention especially on the contradictions within the system, and try to view these as design flaws. It would attempt to estimate, at least in qualitative terms, the price the American people pay for trying in theory to be and do different things at the same time.

Finally, a critical, philosophic political science could be explicitly evaluative. If the price of our political contradictions is too high, how could we reorder our values? Could we redesign our institutions so that we might more consistently pursue values, now made explicit, we still wish to pursue? Is liberal democracy, now defined concretely and with a clear exposure of its assumptions and goals, the most and the best we could hope for in our

political lives? Are we stuck with the American presidency as presently established? Or could we fundamentally redefine its relationships and functions *vis a vis* other elements in the polity, so that by deliberate design it could more intentionally and consistently work to achieve goals we could specify for it?

I choose to end this discussion of these matters on this note. There are many able and comprehensive books descriptive of, especially, aspects of the American political system. For example, take Hargrove and Nelson's *Presidents, Politics, and Policy*. This book is widely and deservedly well thought of. Yet note this statement on page 9:

Few books on the presidency conclude without offering an agenda for reforming the presidency. Ours is among the few. . . . The truth is that given our Constitution and culture, the presidency works well. Most current quarrels with the presidency really are quarrels with those deeper forces in the political system.

So, instead of launching what could have been a promising critical discussion, in several senses of the word, the discussion stops.

Comparably, students of American political thought have shied away from discussion of political institutions. Thus, Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* is still regarded in many circles as one of the most significant contributions to the study of American political thought of this century. Yet it includes not a chapter on the liberal character of American political institutions. Even more extreme in this regard is Thomas Pangle's *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism*—a book with a picture of the founders in convention on the cover of its paperback edition. In this volume, Pangle repeatedly begs us to go back to the basic documents. Yet nowhere in this book is there a sustained discussion of either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, much less of how their clauses and provisions give systematic expression to

philosophic outlooks. In fact, neither is listed in the book's index.

I conclude: the time has long since come for students of institutions to add to their considerable talents a familiarity with political theory. Even more to the point, the time has long since come when political theorists should begin searching out the philosophical character of political institutions.

There is work to be done. We have nothing to lose but our chains.

### Notes

\*The allusion is to Aquinas's assertion (1924, 4–15) that there are two ways to divine truth.

1. It will be a fundamental misunderstanding of the argument of this paper if it is greeted with statements along lines like, "You are right. Ideology is a much neglected factor determining political behavior." See footnote 2 and Hoover, 1994, 11–13.

2. In a phrase, the methodology urged in this paper is that of "mundane phenomenology." (The phrase in fact comes from Fred Dallmayr.) Besides being essentially Kantian, this methodology owes much to Weber's concept of *verstehen* and his theory of "intentional sociology." See Kant (1965, 1947), Mead (1934, esp. pt. 3), Shutz (1967, esp. chaps. 1 and 3), Weber (1969), and, very importantly, Winch (1958).

3. In my *Poverty of American Politics*, I attempted to answer most of the questions in the first two groups of the following questions. I make a first try at the third group in my forthcoming, "The nth Amendment."

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