Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom, Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend

Arguments for Pluralism and against Monopoly in Political Science

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Economics over the years has become more and more abstract and divorced from events in the real world. Economists, by and large, do not study the workings of the actual economic system. They theorize about it. As Ely Devons, an English economist, once said at a meeting, “If economists wished to study the horse, they wouldn’t go and look at horses. They’d sit in their studies and say to themselves, ‘What would I do if were a horse?’”

—Ronald Coase, The Task of the Society

Neither Mikhail Gorbachev’s “perestroika” movement nor Mao Tse-tung’s “Let a hundred flowers bloom” campaign achieved its objective in the near term. But over time they may have helped to make some good things happen. It is in that spirit that I offer a few thoughts about the case for pluralism and the case against monopoly in the theory and practice of political science.

I start making the case for pluralism and against monopoly by invoking the grand themes of a recent book by Stephen Toulmin, Return to Reason. Toulmin argues that because rationality as found in the world is contextual and thus plural, it is at best illusory and at worst damaging to thought, knowledge, and explanation to invoke it as a universal, objective standard. The capacity of reason to help us know and act better has been damaged, he says, by a serious imbalance in our pursuit of knowledge. Reliance on rationality, understood and practiced as a mathematical form of reasoning modeled on scientific method and the quest for absolute certainties, has lowered the value of reasonableness, that is, humane judgments based on personal experience and practice. A lot of scholarship in economics and those who emulate such scholarship in other social sciences, Toulmin finds, value expert knowledge and theoretical constructs above the testimony of diverse communities and the practical experience of individuals. Toulmin argues for the need to confront the challenges of an uncertain and unpredictable world not by applying abstract
theories, but by returning to a humane form of reason that accepts variability, complexity, and contingency.

Deirdre McCloskey finds that the kind of economics practiced in Ronald Coase’s Nobel Prize–winning article, “The Nature of the Firm” (1937), accords with Toulmin’s humane form of reason, including casuistic reasoning about and from cases. McCloskey tells us that “Coasean economics is Anti-Modernist, ‘Gothic,’ postmodernist in its rhetoric.” Coase’s economics is anti-modern because it doesn’t draw on “the rhetoric of axiomatization, the French claim since Descartes that we know what we mean only if we know what axioms we have started with . . . and was brought to perfection as the main method of economics by Paul Samuelson. Assume a maximizing individual self-aware of his constraints and tastes, and proceed. You will then know what you mean.” It is “Gothic” because it doesn’t engage in a search “for a grail of a unified field theory, an awakening from Descartes’ Dream.” Coase’s economics is postmodern, McCloskey argues, because it is casuistic rather than universalist. Coase uses “a case by case approach” that embodies common sense and common morality, common law rather than jurisprudential [law],” and he looks for “the stories and metaphors and facts and logics that fit the case in hand.”

The Perestroika movement within the APSA has been directed in large measure against the monopoly view of knowledge that practitioners of rational choice scholarship often adopt. They tend to identify with a view of scientific knowledge that claims to be based on and to produce objective, universal truths and to use categories and “facts” that are divorced from time, place, and circumstances. Here I want to argue for a pluralist view of knowing and knowledge. It starts with denying “science” a monopoly on the asking and answering of questions by recognizing the variety of ways that questions can be framed and answered and the several forms of knowledge and kinds of truth associated with multiple modes of inquiry. These include subjective, moral, practical, tacit, and local knowledge and imaginative, partial, contingent, and spiritual truth.

In a 1957 BBC talk, Isaiah Berlin spoke about how to think about rationality in the context of political science. He argued that the idea that political science rests on laws and experiments like those of physics “was the notion, concealed or open, of both Hobbes and Spinoza . . . a notion that grew more powerful in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the natural sciences acquired enormous prestige, and attempts were made to maintain that anything not capable of being reduced to a natural science could not properly be called knowledge at all.” Berlin denied the claim that anything worthy of being called knowledge had to be reduced to a version of natural science. Quite the contrary: “The arts of life—not least of politics . . . possess their own special methods and techniques, their own criteria of success and failure. . . . To be rational in any sphere, to apply good judgment in it, is to apply those methods which have turned out to work best in it.”

One form of knowledge dismissed when the social sciences stress their claims that they are science is subjective knowledge. But need we accept the
monopoly claims of objective knowledge? M. N. Srinivas died in Bangalore on November 30, 1999. He was India’s leading anthropologist, and a scholar of world renown. Passages from two of his last articles offer warrants for the use of subjective knowledge in social science theorizing. These passages make clear that by the late 1990s Srinivas had gone beyond explanation based on social structure and social function to an appreciation of the importance of subjective knowledge and human agency in the making and shaping of culture. As he wrote:

Every life mirrors to some extent the culture and the changes it undergoes. The life of every individual can be regarded as a “case study,” and who is better qualified than the individual himself to study?

The value of biographical literature, including autobiography, biography, memoirs and diaries as sources for cultural and economic history, is well known. Historians regard them as essential to their work, and anthropologists working in societies with literate tradition, have also used them even when their main source of information was fieldwork. While this is as it should be, it is surprising that anthropologists have yet to look at their own lives as sources of information about their culture, especially as they are undergoing radical change. Anthropology started as the study of “the other,” an exotic other, but now there are dozens of anthropologists engaged in the study of their own cultures. The culmination of the movement from the study of other to studying of one’s own culture is surely the study of one’s own life? The latter can be looked at as a field, with the anthropologist being both the observer and the observed, ending for once the duality which inheres in all traditional fieldwork.

Srinivas was not alone in challenging the monopoly of objective truth. James Clifford’s introduction to Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, illustrates the “higher realism” by telling us a story about a Cree hunter. When put under oath in a Canadian court to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about his way of life in connection with a case about his people’s hunting lands, he said, “I’m not sure I can tell the truth . . . I can tell what I know.”

The Cree’s response suggests that subjectivity has its own rules. The following story from the diary of Amar Singh, a subjective account that I have been interpreting, indicates the kind of truth, that is, the “rigorous partiality” of self-knowledge, that we can find in a “self as other” ethnography. Amar Singh was a North Indian nobleman who in 1899 had just completed the first full year of his forty-four-year diary. He responded to a rebuke from his respected teacher, the bard (charan) Ram Nathji. In a note penciled in at the end of the 1899 volume, Ram Nathji chastised Amar Singh for writing so much about “butchery” (hunting boars and tigers, or “pig sticking”) when his native Jodhpur was experiencing the worst famine in a century, a normatively worthier topic. “I ought surely to have written about the famine,” responded Amar Singh,
“but you must bear in mind that no opportunities were given me to study or watch it and consequently I could not write anything . . . fearing that I might put in something quite out of place. What I have written is of which I am an eye witness or have heard from very reliable sources.” Amar Singh, like the Cree, seemed clear about telling what he knew—things he could study and watch—and not telling about those he couldn’t. His subjective knowledge was true because it was partial and contextual.

An essay Amar Singh wrote in his diary while serving in World War I, “The Importance of Keeping Records,” written from the western front on October 15, 1915, shows how the absence of subjective knowledge supplied by first-person narratives can compromise voice and representation. Amar Singh was concerned that, in the absence of “eye witness” accounts, the story of Indian soldiers’ contribution to the Allies’ victory might be lost from view. The war had begun in early August 1914. By late September, the Indian expeditionary force had landed at Marseilles and had arrived at the northern front, where it helped to prevent the execution of the German army’s Schlieffen plan to encircle Paris by invading Belgium and then penetrating to the Marne. Amar Singh feared that the Indian soldiers’ story would fall victim to India’s colonial relationship to Britain. He wrote: “To my mind it is a thing of the greatest importance to keep up a nation’s records. In this we are backward . . . Both [the Maharajas] of Jodhpur and Bikaner who have brought their own troops to fight in this world wide conflict ought to have brought their own charans, who are our hereditary recorders. . . . What we want is a man of learning and imagination who could and would write from personal experience. . . . The English historians will simply treat . . . the war in a very general way. . . . What we can expect is a mere mention.” The absence of an “eye witness” account by a colonial subject did indeed result in reduction of the Indian troops’ contribution to the Allied war effort to a “mere mention” in Imperial history.

What are the prospects for intersubjective communication and comparative generalization in the context of cultural pluralism? Clifford Geertz and Richard Shweder invoke forms of life with their own ways of thinking and knowing. Geertz has taught us that cultural differences matter and that they erect barriers to communication, understanding, and explanation. At the same time, he finds space for commensurability sufficient to compare, generalize, and sometimes to explain. It is possible, he argues, for “people inhabiting different worlds to have a genuine, and reciprocal, impact upon one another.” They can, he holds, construct a public vocabulary that allows them to talk to each other. The scholar can transcend incommensurability too because, seeing beyond the cultural uniqueness that distinct forms of life entail, she can make cross-cultural comparisons. Command of the languages involved is usually a condition not only for mutual comprehension, but also for bridging differences.

In *Thinking through Culture: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* Richard Shweder, like Clifford Geertz, makes a case for a pluralism of “multiple objective worlds” that are able, under certain circumstances, to converse with each other. The case for pluralism finds support too from a view of culture that
recognizes that it can be made as well as enacted; culture in the making as well as in the doing. \textsuperscript{21} To view culture as constituted as well as given suggests that it is wise to avoid dichotomies such as culture versus psychology or structure versus agency as determinants of reality or truth. All four terms are involved in mutual determining processes and interactions. Shweder puts it this way: “Psyche refers to the intentional person. Culture refers to the intentional world. Intentional persons and intentional worlds are interdependent things that get dialectically constituted and reconstituted through the intentional activities and practices that are their products, yet make them up.”\textsuperscript{22}

Let me conclude by invoking one who to some readers might seem an unlikely theorist of pluralism in the social sciences. I cite Mohandas Gandhi for what he taught about relative, contextual, and partial truths and the standing of subjective knowledge. A \textit{karma yogi}, one who believes in disciplined engagement with the world, he sought “truth in action,” most notably in the theory and practice of \textit{satyagraha}.\textsuperscript{23} By “truth in action” he meant that there was a truth in each action, a contextual truth that had to be found afresh each time.

In the introduction to his “autobiography,” Gandhi tells us that “it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. . . . Far be it from me,” he continues, “to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them. . . . I am far from claiming any finality or infallibility about my conclusions . . . [even though] for the time being . . . they appear to be absolutely correct. . . . If they were not, I should base no action on them. . . . So long as my acts satisfy my reason and my heart, I must firmly adhere to my original conclusions.”

While Gandhi recognized the existence of “Absolute Truth,” he also believed that mortals can at best gain “faint glimpses” of it. “As long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth,” he continues, “so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler.” For Gandhi, practitioner of truth in action, knowledge was subjective and truth contextual and partial.\textsuperscript{24}

Notes

This chapter is based on a paper prepared for Panel 7-1, “Perestroika: Undisciplined, Unpunished,” at the APSA annual meeting on August 31, 2001, in San Francisco, California.


Press, 1988]) have rescued the word ‘casuistic’ from the contempt into which it had fallen. . . . They take it as a thoroughly modern approach to ethics, in the context of the revival of the Aristotelian studies of the particular virtues.” Deirdre McCloskey, “The Lawyerly Rhetoric of Coase’s ‘The Nature of the Firm,’” in Measurement and Meaning: The Essential Deirdre McCloskey, ed. Thomas Ziliak (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2001), 293.


4. Ibid., 281.

5. McCloskey draws on John Ruskin’s critique of Renaissance architecture to come up with her concept of Gothic. As McCloskey tells it, Ruskin noted “that the search for a crystalline Ideal has been an incubus on classical and Renaissance, and now we may say modernist, architecture.” The Renaissance’s main mistake, Ruskin wrote, “was the unwholesome demand for perfection at any cost.” According to McCloskey, “Ruskin’s argument fits positivism in economics . . . which seeks an all-embracing, testable, Theory apart from the practical skills of the statesman, the craftsman, or the economic scientist.” McCloskey, “Lawyerly Rhetoric,” 292.

6. Ibid., 293.


8. James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). To convey the idea of practical and often local knowledge and skill, Scott prefers the ancient Greek term *metis* to more familiar but less apropos phrases and terms such as “‘indigenous technical knowledge,’ ‘folk wisdom,’ ‘practical skills,’ techne, and so on” (313). He acknowledges his debt to anarchist writers (Piotr Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre Joseph Proudhon), “who consistently emphasize the role of mutuality as opposed to imperative, hierarchical coordination in the creation of social order” (7). As I suggest later, Gandhi’s “truth in action,” often via the mutuality of truth associated with a successful *satyagraha* campaign, resembles what Scott seems to be getting at here.


10. On *metis*, see Scott, Seeing Like a State, 316–19, where he stresses the localness and particularity of practical knowledge.


13. M. N. Srinivas, “Indian Anthropologists and the Study of Indian Culture,” Economic and Political Weekly, March 16, 1996: 657, and “Social Anthropology and Literary Sensibility,” Economic and Political Weekly, September 26, 1998: 2528. See also his introduction to Indian Society through Personal Writing (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), where he observes: “It is my plea that the movement from studying one’s own culture or a niche in it, to studying oneself as an ethnographic field, is a natural one. In the west, anthropology started as a study of ‘the other,’ generally a weaker, inferior and exploited ‘other,’ but in India it has largely been a study of the self or the self in-the-other. And this should extend to include one’s own life. ‘Sociology of the Self’ should be a rich field given the diversities and unities which the members of Indian civilization, are heir to” (xi).
Andre Beteille’s appreciation of Srinivas as a structural functionalist, which he was throughout most of his professional life, can be found in his “M. N. Srinivas (November 16, 1916–November 30, 1999),” *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 8–14, 2000: 18–22.


16. Comments written in the margin of Amar Singh’s diary for 1899, the diary’s first year. The full text of the young Amar Singh’s response to Ram Nathji’s comments at the end of the 1899 bound diary are given below. Ram Nathji was the only person allowed to read the diary. He did so for the first three years, penciling comments in the margins and writing a summary comment at the end.

My dear Master Sahib,

I am indeed very grateful for the trouble you have taken to read the whole of my diary and [to] have written remarks on it. I feel very much honoured by it. You know this perfectly, that you are the only man who has yet been at liberty to do what you like with these pages which, though quite rot and a record of butchery [accounts of hunting expeditions] as you say, can yet put me to great inconvenience if known to bad characters. I ought surely to have written about the famine but you must bear in mind that no opportunities were given me to study or watch it. . . . What I have written is [that] of which I am an eye witness or [what I] have heard from very reliable sources.

17. German strategy was based on the plan prepared by Alfred von Schlieffen. It provided for the concentration of the German main forces on the French front, the passage through Belgium, and a huge wheeling movement to encircle Paris.

18. I have been helped in my effort to answer this question by the fine essays in *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond*, ed. Sherry Ortner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).


23. Best translated “truth force,” though that poorly captures the sense of the word.