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Some Notes on Political "Science"

by Robert Conquest

Mr. Conquest's irreverent essay is excerpted from "Some Notes on the Role of the Academic in International Misunderstanding," a paper presented at a colloquium last January during his stay as a Fellow at the Wilson Center. His chief targets are the claims to scientific rigor made by many academic analysts of politics, war, and international affairs.

"Politics is not an exact science," Bismarck told the Prussian Chamber in the 1860s.

It was at about this time that such a warning was evidently beginning to be necessary. German academics who had, so they thought, systemized most other fields of knowledge, were now treating history and politics as though these, too, could be brought within a set of formulae. They were developing a tradition that had only recently become dominant, though it went back to such aberrations as Leibnitz's "mathematical proof" in 1664 that the Count Palatine of Neuberger must win the Polish throne.

Theories As Doctrine

In the century that followed Bismarck's warning, the prestige of the physical and other genuine sciences has grown so great that other studies have wished to share it. Unfortunately, it is not as easy to introduce the scientific rigors—such as testing of evidence—into areas from which the information extracted is as yet

greatly insufficient for such structures. As a result, in psychology, sociology, linguistics, literary criticism, and so forth, highly inflated theorizings have been treated as though they were established doctrine.

Their true intellectual position is roughly that of phrenology—the practice of measuring mental ability by the conformation of the human skull—in the last century. A complicated and (on the face of it) sophisticated methodology was used to study phenomena which appeared to be directly related to the subject, but from which in practice absolutely no useful information could be extracted. Similarly, physiognomy was developed as a "science"; Norman Douglas, in *Siren Land* (1911), effectively ridicules the attempts by its practitioners to deduce many contradictory characteristics from a bust of Tiberius—one which, as it happened, was probably not a bust of Tiberius at all.

Yet the academic mind cannot be

kept from premature theory. Behavioralism, systems analysis—and soon, no doubt, “catastrophe theory”—arise elsewhere and are applied one by one to politics.

Wolves and Bassets

And so we see the ready adoption of terms like “system” and “structure” to describe and even to predict human activity.

The key word in modern academic studies of politics is “model.” With its overtones of something that works in the same way as its original, such as a *model* steam engine, the term is highly inappropriate. A modest and realistic word like “sketch” would be more suitable; it would avoid giving the impression that the model-maker, at least in essentials, has mastered the workings of his original. He never has. Politics are *sui generis*.

The word “system” is so general that it can be used in any field from nuclear weaponry to elementary education and thus leads to the widespread assumption that the ideas of design, engineering, measurement, and analysis suitable to the one can be applied to the other.

Resemblances of form rather than of intent or actual activity tend to mislead. A wolf has a very close resemblance, physiologically speaking, to a basset hound. Its reaction to a

pat on the head, however, is different. A death camp is “structured,” both physically and operationally, very much like a holiday camp. Two identically structured cars may present different dangers if one of them is driven by an alcoholic psychopath. The Roman Empire had the same “structure” under Nero as under Vespasian.

The same objection applies to *all* premature systematizing. The success of conceptual and mathematical rigor in the fields in which it can be applied—for example, in the engineering triumphs which went into the Apollo spacecraft—must be distinguished severely from the failure in areas where an allegedly scientific or rigorous “system” has been applied, but where the rigor is in fact inapplicable.

The failure of scientific sociologists in putting vast sums of money into poverty programs which have not done anything for poverty, except to some degree among the bureaucracy, is matched by the failure of Mr. McNamara’s Pentagon academics and their computerized science of war, with its “escalations” and “responses.”

Generally speaking, attempts by the new schools of political science to introduce “rigor” into their subject are just as fallacious, and hence dangerous if taken seriously—and, if

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not, a notable waste of money. A recent attempt is reported to analyze problems of international détente by feeding 1,200 factors into a computer. Such readily numericized factors, of course, do not exist.

It is impossible, even in principle, to design a computer that could cover all the potentialities of even a chess game, for it can be shown that such a computer would need more units than there can be particles in the entire universe. And chess has rules in the sense that international politics does not.

In all areas of historical and anthropological investigation, *genuine* scholars have progressively abandoned both theories of linear development and older attempts to attain generality by the selection and inflation of often superficial similarities.

A "Scientific" Delusion

On the other hand, at a certain theoretical level, worthless generalization is still rampant—nowhere more so than in political "science."

It is for the most part evident to both newspaper readers and serious students that (except in a very short-range sense) predictability in the political and social field is unattainable, at any rate by the weak and fallible general theories now in existence. The academic urge to premature and inadequately supported generalities, far from being a higher development, is a sure sign of primitivism.

Insofar as such generalities retain the element of intellectual rigor that makes them liable to refutation on empirical and evidential grounds, they are invariably so refuted. Insofar as they are irrefutable, it is precisely because they are so general and flexible as to convey no real information. In that case, why do they emerge and flourish? We are plainly in the presence not of an intellectual but of a psychological phenomenon: an astonishing tribute to the power and persistence of the human desire for tidiness and certitude, even when these are totally inappropriate.
