

# THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

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## *Civil War in the Social Sciences*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

Leafing through the pages of the *American Political Science Review*, a reader might be forgiven for thinking he had stumbled upon an engineering journal, so thick are the pages with abstruse mathematics. Many political scientists have had the same reaction themselves. Indeed, there's now a civil war raging over the question, Is there too much "science" in contemporary political science—or, as those who would remove the quotation marks say, too little? In economics, a similar struggle over the meaning and role of science in the discipline has been underway for years.

Gathered under the inclusive (if, to outsiders, less than stirring) banner of "methodological pluralism," hundreds of political scientists have recently formed a "perestroika" movement to resist the ascendancy of the advocates of "hard science"—"rational choice" theorists, game theorists, and devotees of statistical analysis.

"These quantitative types, say perestroikans, exert hegemonic tendencies, ignoring or dismissing research that they don't consider 'scientific'—for example, interpretative research by area specialists . . . based on fieldwork in a specific country or among a specific people, or theoretical work [that] relies on a few carefully chosen case studies and historical context to prove a point," observes Sharla A. Stewart, an associate editor

of *University of Chicago Magazine* (June 2003), in an overview of the controversy.

It's tempting to call the perestroikans Luddites, says David D. Laitin, a political scientist at Stanford University and a rational-choice proponent. "Indeed, their abhorrence of all things mathematical—and their typical but useless conflation of statistical and formal reasoning—reveals a fear of the modern." While admitting that "seeking a science of social life" may well be "a Sisyphean project," he rises to defend it in *Politics & Society* (March 2003).

Laitin sees a role for "narrative" in political science, but only in conjunction with "statistical and formal analysis" and within a "scientific frame." Responding to the perestroikan argument for letting "a hundred flowers bloom" in the discipline, Laitin contends that "formal and statistical research" are not just two flowers among many, and that some lesser flowers should *not* be allowed to bloom: "If theoretical logic or scientific evidence finds a theory or procedure to be fallacious, that procedure's flower bed should no longer be cultivated within the discipline. There can be no hope of cumulation [of scientific knowledge] if we insist that all methods, and all procedures, must be protected."

It is precisely that "hegemonic ambition" that Gregory Kaska, a political scientist at Indiana University, and other perestroikans find objectionable. In zealous pursuit of it,

“some hard scientists have corrupted decision making on hiring, promotion, curriculum, and publication,” he writes in *PS: Political Science and Politics* (September 2001). “Many seek to indoctrinate graduate students instead of teaching them to think for themselves.” Hard-scientific scholarship, Kaska contends, “is increasingly irrelevant to the normative and practical problems of real politics.” It gives moral questions short shrift, pushes classical political philosophy to the margins, and strips what empirical facts it recognizes of context so thoroughly that it renders the theories it constructs largely irrelevant.

The insurgents have had some success. Leading perestroikan Suzanne Rudolph, of the University of Chicago, is now serving a one-year term as president of the American Political Science Association, and *American Political Science Review*, APSA’s flagship journal, has been including more “qualitative” research. But John Mearsheimer, another University of Chicago perestroikan and a noted “realist” foreign-policy theoretician, minimizes those triumphs. He tells Stewart that the only real question is, “Are the elite [university] departments willing to hire qualitative people?” That’s “where the Ph.D’s are produced who will populate the field over time.” He sees little sign of change.

Political scientists should look at what has happened to economics, Mearsheimer warns. “Economics was once a discipline that promised a home for qualitative research,” he says. “Now it’s been driven out.”

In economics, some of the dissenters, in 1993, formed the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics. It includes evolutionary or institutional economists, post-Keynesians, and economic historians, among others.

In the *Journal of Economic Issues* (Mar. 2003), published by the Association for Evolutionary Economics, 15 scholars mark the 50th anniversary of David Hamilton’s *Newtonian Classicism and Darwinian Institutionalism* (re-published as *Evolutionary Economics: A Study of Change in Economic Thought*). The original title points to the opposition Hamilton identified: between classical economics, in which social organization and human nature are fixed, and institutional economics, in which they are always changing. The classical model

says that markets drive economic progress; in the evolutionary view, technological change is the driver.

But mainstream economics has evolved and now includes “significant discussion of evolution” and institutions, argues contributor David Colander, an economist at Middlebury College in Vermont. Institutional economists remain on the margins of their profession—deservedly, he seems to think—because of their “verbal, case study, historical approach.”

**T**he behaviorists, a dissident group that rejects neither the neoclassicists’ number-laden methods nor their emphasis on the individual, have fared much better than other groups. Behaviorists regard the neoclassical assumption of a perfectly rational “economic man” as unrealistic. They argue that economists must make use of psychology, experimental evidence, and data from the field to create a more accurate model of economic behavior. People are more shortsighted, slower to learn, and more prone to the power of suggestion than conventional economics assumes. Consider a simple example: Even though it’s highly rational to save for retirement through a tax-advantaged 401(k) program, studies show that less than half of those eligible enroll if left to their own devices. But if new employees are automatically enrolled in their employer’s 401(k) program unless they opt out, enrollment climbs to about 70 percent.

At a conference sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston ([www.bos.frb.org](http://www.bos.frb.org)), Harvard University economists Daniel J. Benjamin and David I. Laibson claimed that “many if not most” of the behaviorists’ basic insights are now “widely accepted within the profession.” Benjamin and Laibson said they anticipated that those perspectives would increasingly be included in policy discussions.

Perhaps so. But some developments don’t point to a peaceful resolution of the wars in the social sciences. At the University of Notre Dame, students arrived this fall to find the old economics department literally split in two: The Department of Economics and Econometrics is devoted to “rigorous theoretical and quantitative analysis,” while the Department of Economics and Policy Studies is committed to “analyzing issues relating to socioeconomic justice and ethics in economics.”