

Political Sociology

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The current division of labor within the social sciences is not set in stone. It is the historical outcome of institutional and intellectual developments that also display national variation. In Britain the social sciences emerged out of political history and philosophy, and social research, often driven by philanthropy. In Continental Europe, where social and political science is closely associated with the training of national administrative elites, it emerged largely out of law. In the United States, where there is a strong tradition of political liberalism (egalitarianism plus small government), social research modeled itself early on the natural sciences (see Anderson 2003). In each case, the social sciences are closely associated with processes of nation-state formation and with the state's need to make society "legible" – and thus governable – by standardizing and collecting data (see Scott 1998).

One key intellectual development that had impact well beyond national borders was the so-called "methods dispute" (*Methodenstreit*) among economists in Germany and Austria around the turn of the twentieth century. On the one side stood those economists who saw their discipline as a historical science concerned with the development of national economies; on the other those representatives of what became the Austrian School, who argued for economics as a positive science concerned with the discovery of universal laws and the building of abstract models. The latter's victory had implications for the social sciences as a whole. It "left politics as a residue [...] and created a domain for a separate science of politics" (Anderson 2003: 17). The same can be said of "the social" and sociology. As is commonly the case with academic disciplines, the strategy was then to identify an object around which the discipline could form and over which a monopoly claim could be asserted. Thus political science emerged as the study of governments, parties, and political systems, while sociology sought to establish "society" as an independent object of academic research. Any system of categorization creates "matter out of place"; matter that falls across or between the categorical schema and with which the schema cannot adequately deal. So too it is with disciplines. If political and social systems are separate and autonomous fields of knowledge, what happens to the connections between those systems? How are we to understand the relationship between "the political" and "the social"; between state and civil society?

Within this disciplinary order, political sociology, like political economy, is concerned with those areas of investigation that are not well integrated within the historically transmitted division of disciplinary labor because they lie between and/or across disciplinary boundaries and, for precisely this reason, are marginal. Glancing through the contents list of major handbooks of political sociology (e.g., Janoski et al. 2005; Amenta, Nash, and Scott 2012) confirms this impression. These volumes typically include both topics that would not look out of place in similar works in political science (e.g., democracy and democratization) and those that are marginal to both relevant disciplines (e.g., the relationship of gender, ethnicity, or religion to politics and to the state). But this perhaps gives the impression that political sociology is a mere potpourri of themes that are, or were at some point, neglected. This impression is reinforced when we remember that political sociology is not characterized by a common theoretical approach or methodology. The variety of approaches that are to be found within contemporary social science generally – e.g., Marxism, rational choice theory, constructionism, neo-institutionalism – are mirrored in political sociology.

To counter this impression, a first approximation to understanding political sociology might be to view it as a distinctive approach primarily concerned with (i) the social basis of politics (e.g., the class and other cleavages that underlie voting patterns) and (ii) the ways in which the state and politics shape and impact upon social relations (e.g., the way citizenship rights shape social identities). Rather than assert the kind of monopolistic claims over a distinct object of analysis that characterizes the dominant logic of disciplinary, trans- or cross-disciplinary fields seek to identify the connections between areas of investigation that can be easily lost in the process of discipline formation. This is evident in two themes that have been central concerns within political sociology: social movements and processes of state formation. It is worth considering each briefly.

Social movements represent precisely the kind of object that lies neatly within neither the sphere of the political nor the social. Unlike political parties – which have been a staple of political science since its inception – social movements are not highly integrated into politics or institutionalized within the political system. But nor are they apolitical social phenomena outside the sphere of politics. They are manifestations of “organized civil society,” or what Durkheim called “political society”; a sphere intermediate between individuals and informal groups on the one hand, and the more formal institutions of the state on the other. It is thus neither a surprise nor a coincidence that the systematic study of social movements should have found its natural home within political sociology. The kinds of analysis that have developed to account for social movements similarly illustrate the concern with the intersection of politics and society. Thus one strand of social movement analysis emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of social movements by focusing on the role of cultural identity and/or emotions in shaping collective action, while another – coming from the opposite direction – shows how formal political institutions create (nationally) distinct “political opportunity structures” that influence the strategies – and thus the organizational form – adopted by social movements in pursuing their political objectives. While the former emphasizes the affective and non-instrumental aspects of the formation of collective identity and action, the latter emphasizes the elements of instrumental and strategic rationality that effective political action demands. But even this distinction between the affective and the instrumental is not so clear-cut. Protest, for example, is not merely a manifestation of a political demand; it also builds a sense of community and identity. Finally, social movements illustrate one

further feature of the relationship between politics and society: the fluidity of its borders. By politicizing themes – from the employer–employee relationship (once considered a contractual matter) to LGBT rights – that were previously thought of as lying within the private (contractual or personal) sphere, social movements constantly challenge our understanding of what the social or the political really are, and where the boundaries between them lie.

State formation illustrates political sociology's concern with topics neglected by political science and/or sociology in a somewhat different way. As political science sought post-World War II to establish itself – particularly in the United States – as a modern science grounded in methodologically sound social research, the notion of “the state” came to be viewed as a relic of an earlier disciplinary stage; as a mystification immune to serious empirical research. Its place was to be taken by such notions as the “political system,” thought to be more amenable to empirical enquiry. It was left to historical and political sociologists such as Barrington Moore Jr., Theda Skocpol, and Charles Tilly to reintroduced the state as a legitimate theme in social analysis, the publication of Evans and colleagues' *Bringing the State Back In* in 1985 being the pivotal moment. In doing so, these sociologists incidentally built a bridge between contemporary debate and classical social theory in its pre-disciplinary form by reviving a concern with the definition of the state and the role of the monopoly of violence, pacification, and warfare in state making. These questions had been of central concern in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social theory; notably, of course, in the work of Max Weber and contemporaries such as the historian Otto Hintze. Thus, political sociology is not merely *cross-* or *trans-*disciplinary; it is in some respects *pre-*disciplinary, or at least harks back to a time before social-scientific disciplines had staked their monopolistic claims.

But the element of continuity between political sociology and strands of thought influential long before the emergence of modern social sciences can be traced back even further with perhaps still more radical implications. As some influential postwar political scientists recognized, political sociology is more than the “sociology of politics” in that it introduces normative questions of the kind that have traditionally occupied political theory into the more empirically minded social sciences. Thus far, it has been suggested that political sociology is concerned with the *connections* between the social and the political, but if we trace its origins back far enough into political theory we soon find ourselves at a point in which there was no meaningful distinction between “the political” and “the social.” Correspondingly, we find a line of argument in political sociology which, as Sartori suspected and feared, takes an altogether dissenting view on the division of labor between the social sciences. This is a position that we might instantly associate with poststructuralist thought and/or with Foucault, but in fact, there is a long tradition of such radical disciplinary doubt within political sociology. For example, in the 1960s the then highly influential, and now no-less deeply unfashionable, French political sociologist Raymond Aron admonished sociology for its neglect of technical instruments of state (laws, constitutions, etc.) and for “failing to take into account the partial autonomy of the political order” (Aron [1961] 2004: 218) while simultaneously doubting the feasibility of a political science that conceived of its object as disembedded from social relations and social forces.

Finally, political sociology is an area in which the limits to the capacity of academic disciplines to set their own agenda are particularly apparent. For example, social movements

do not simply represent an *object* of political–sociological analysis, but also a key *stimulus* that co-shapes the field. Of course, this is true, to varying degrees, of the social sciences generally – think for example of the influence of feminism or communitarianism in political and social theory, and in sociology. But political sociology is an area of investigation in which, in an immediately evident fashion, not merely the boundaries between disciplines are questioned, but the boundary between academic and scientific research and social and political action is itself challenged. Dilemmas of degrees of engagement and detachment are thus particularly evident.

Political sociology is thus more than a collection of themes, or simply an approach or perspective. It is one of those fields of social scientific investigation that – like political economy – does not sit comfortably within the, itself unstable, disciplinary division of labor; which displays a high degree of continuity with classical social and political theory; and in which the mutual influence of political practice and academic debate are particularly transparent.

SEE ALSO: Citizenship; Democracy; Economic Sociology; Marxism; Military Sociology; Modernity; Nationalism; Power and Authority; Social Movements and Social Change

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