

Political Science and the “Micro-Politics” Research Agenda

Anuradha Chakravarty*

Department of Political Science, University of South Carolina, USA

In the last decade, a new research agenda has emerged in political science. Under the broad rubric of “micro-politics” research, these studies focused on the close range analysis of a gamut of questions such as rebel group behavior, popular enactment of genocidal violence, reconciliatory or peace-making behaviors, and democratic citizenship [1-4]. Combining various methodological strategies, these studies refocused attention on the non-elites (the “little people”) as the central object of inquiry. Local level dynamics-local histories, institutions, power struggles, and community-based networks-played an important role in these explanatory frameworks. This Editorial note sketches a broad overview of this agenda not only because it has attracted prominent scholars and enjoyed rapid growth within the discipline, but also because it holds substantial promise for the future of political science.

As a discipline, political science has typically emphasized “high politics” centering on formal institutions and macro-structures, such as legislative and judicial politics, civil-military relations, or political parties at the national or regional levels, and other routinized formal kinds of activities, eg. Voting behaviors, NGO activities etc., the problem was three-fold: First, the mainstream understanding was that policy making flowed from national/regional elites; thus, research on questions of war and peace, development and underdevelopment were to be analyzed at elite level. Second, there was a lack of well developed analytical frameworks to study informal institutions such as practices of reciprocity or the invisible “infra-politics” of subordinate groups, within which to anchor theories that linked local informal processes and practices to local behaviors and ultimately, to state-level outcomes. Jim Scott’s work on the “weapons of the weak” was an important early political science study that conceived individual level informal behaviors as political acts with political consequences [5]. Finally, the substantial physical, monetary, time costs and field work skills required for conducting in-depth micro-level research emerged as formidable challenges to actually carrying out this kind of research.

Nonetheless, a slew of “micro-politics” studies emerged in the last decade that added significant value to existing political science scholarship. Scholars argued that the success or failure of national policies was evidenced in how they were executed at local level. Thus, Fujii [6] demonstrated how the national level genocide “script” in Rwanda was implemented variously at the local level based on local interpretations of orders flowing from the top (2009). Scholars also advanced this research agenda by demonstrating that local dynamics were not simply products of, but actually consequential for state-level outcomes. Kerkvliet’s work showed how thousands of individual actions at the local level unraveled national policy on collective farms in socialist Vietnam (2005) and Austessere’s work showed how interwoven local level conflicts are the source of intractable regional instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2010) [7,8].

New advances in political science theory, such as the “new institutionalisms” [9], and “informal institutions” [10] opened up analytical space to study the impact of historical legacies, social processes and practices on political outcomes. A further impetus to “micro-politics” research came by way of methodologically innovative thinking in the late 1990s, reflected in the self-conscious resurgence of the qualitative and multi-methods movement within political

science. Since “micro-politics” research tends to locate itself at a single or limited number of local sites, the researcher had to guard against tying theoretical frameworks too closely to local, site-based specificities that would impede the ability to make more general claims about the phenomenon of interest that could be valid across mid-range scope conditions. Debates about the self-conscious selection of cases, on developing comparative designs and sound theory-driven process tracing methods etc. generated clarity on the utility of “micro-politics” research designs and methodology for broader questions of theory building and hypothesis evaluation [11,12]. The growing utility of mixed methods that combined different logics of social scientific inquiry, such as using field experiments along with qualitative methods, quantitative surveys etc. enabled more rigorous empirical evaluation of theories.

Political science scholars were also able to leverage the growing emphasis on inter-disciplinary research that has swept academia in the last decade or so. A tradition of “micro-politics” research was already well established in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology [13,14] in which findings from a limited number of field sites were used to reflect upon larger structures of power and domination. Political scientists have generally privileged general insights over local knowledge; they now referred to methodological debates in other disciplines, and borrowed self-consciously from literatures in other fields (for instance, social networks, and social psychology). As with colleagues in other disciplines who conducted field work, political scientists also mulled over larger questions about the ethics of field research. Since researchers were interacting closely with local populations, often in conflict zones, or post-war socially divided and repressive contexts, it became imperative to confront issues pertaining to full disclosure in field relationships, obtaining informed consent, and securing the safety of respondents etc. [15]. For political scientists across the board, not just those conducting “micro-politics” work, conforming to the ethics requirements of institutional review boards has become the established norm.

Looking around at the world today, the sweeping popularity of local level innovations such as micro-finance (Bangladesh), the growing involvement of local level actors in civil wars and internal conflicts (Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo), the reintegration of demobilized rebels into their communities (northern Uganda), the ability of local actors for regulation and dispute resolution even in the context of state failure (Somaliland) have opened up fascinating new questions about micro-dynamics, and the macro-level impacts of those micro-level dynamics. Armed with new analytical frameworks,

*Corresponding author: Anuradha Chakravarty, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of South Carolina, Columbia, USA, Tel: 803-777-2207; Fax: 803-777-8255; E-mail: chakrava@mailbox.sc.edu

Received January 27, 2013; Accepted January 29, 2013; Published February 02, 2013

Citation: Chakravarty A (2013) Political Science and the “Micro-Politics” Research Agenda. J Political Sciences & Public Affairs 1: e103. doi:10.4172/2332-0761.1000e103

Copyright: © 2013 Chakravarty A. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

methodological advances, and the freedom to borrow from proximate disciplines, political scientists who conduct “micro-politics” research are poised to make valuable contributions to policy-relevant knowledge.

References

1. Weinstein JM (2006) *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge University Press, UK.
2. Ithaca SS (2006) *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda*. Cornell University Press, USA.
3. Blattman CM (2009) From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda. *American Political Science Review* 2: 231-247.
4. Maclean LM (2010) *Informal Institutions and Citizenship in Rural Africa: Risk and Reciprocity in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire*. Cambridge University Press, UK.
5. Scott JC (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press, UK.
6. Fujii LA (2009) *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Cornell University Press, USA.
7. Kerkvliet BJ (2005) *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*. Cornell University Press, USA.
8. Autessere S (2010) *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press USA.
9. Hall PA Taylor, RCR (1996) Political Science and the Three New Institutionalism. *Political Studies* XLIV 936-957.
10. Helmke G, Levitsky S (2004) Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A research agenda. *Perspectives on Politics* 2: 725-740.
11. George A, Bennett A (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. the MIT Press, UK.
12. Gerring J, Dermott R MC (2007) An Experimental Template for Case Study Research *American Journal of Political Science* 51: 688-701.
13. Liebow E (1967) *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Little Brown and Company Inc.
14. Hirsch SF (1998) *Pronouncing and Persevering: Gender and the discourses of disputing in an African Islamic Court*. University of Chicago Press USA.
15. Sriram CL, King JC, Mertus JA, Ortega OM, Herman J (2009) *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*. Routledge Press UK.