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Revolution from within

WRITTEN BY SHARLA A. STEWART
ILLUSTRATION BY MIRKO ILIC
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Ask Mearsheimer today about perestroika's progress, and he's not even

cautiously optimistic. "The only real measure of how successful perestroika has been is, Are the elite departments willing to hire qualitative people? Has pressure from perestroika made elite departments more likely to hire people who

don't use math? My sense is that it's had little effect. But," he backtracks, "it's early." Probably the movement's greatest fault, he says, is its tendency to focus too much energy on APSA and not enough on departments. "Success in the association and its journal is of limited importance. There's no question that APSA matters to the future of political science, and what APSR publishes has an indirect way of affecting what happens inside departments. But if members of a department believe a qualitative article—even if it's published in *APSR*—doesn't count, then it doesn't count. One shouldn't," he warns, "underestimate the narrowness of many political scientists in terms of their intellectual tastes and tolerance for different approaches."

Whether or not qualitative researchers can get jobs is a theme that Mearsheimer sounds repeatedly, and it's one that surfaces often on [perestroika_glasnost_warmhome](#), where graduate students tell of reluctantly incorporating statistical methodologies into their work in hopes of bettering their odds on the job market. That wasn't something Sujatha Fernandes, AM'00, PhD'03, who in April defended an interpretive dissertation on the interaction between art and politics in contemporary Cuba, was willing to do. But that's also why, although she applied to major political-science departments, she didn't expect or get a call-back. "I never expected to—regardless of the quality of my work—have a chance against rational-choice candidates," says Fernandes, who this fall begins a three-year Cotsen-Wilson fellowship at Princeton as part of the interdisciplinary Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts. Because she and her partner were job hunting at the same time, she also restricted her search to major cities, leaving out small liberal-arts colleges, where she figures an interpretivist is most likely to find a home.

Therein lies the problem, says Mearsheimer. That qualitative political scientists increasingly take refuge in small colleges is proof of the discipline's "economics envy," he says. "The major university departments are important because that's where the Ph.D.s are produced who will populate the field over time. If 20 years from now those departments are filled only with statisticians and mathematicians, the war is lost." Perestroikans should pay close attention to the path that economics, now the most scientific of the social sciences, has taken. "Economics



Mirko Ilic

was once a discipline that promised a home for qualitative research,” he says. “Now it’s been driven out.” (Members of the decade-old International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics concur. That group counts among its members “institutionalists, evolutionary economists, post-Keynesians, economic rhetoricians, systems theorists, feminists, economic historians, ecological economists, historians of thought, and political economists”—all united by their concern that the monolithic dominance of the neoclassical approach to economics is strangling their discipline.)

The worst thing that could happen, agrees Chicago political-science professor and department chair John Brehm, is that departments fracture into “purely quantitative, philosophical, or qualitative” enclaves. Both Brehm, who does large-N studies in political psychology and American politics and is not a perestroikan but believes the movement is good for the discipline, and Mearsheimer cite the University of Notre Dame’s economics department, which will split into two departments this fall, one orthodox (quantitative) graduate program and one, with no graduate program, for those who focus on economic thought, social justice, and public policy (heterodox, qualitative stuff). “We steal from every discipline on the planet—economics, history, sociology, math, philosophy,” Brehm says, “and it’s fortunate for the discipline that all these coexist and that the work is all valued on the same criterion: what it tells us about politics.” If the two sides of perestroika can’t see eye-to-eye, says Brehm, it’s not inconceivable that political-science departments could follow the lead of Notre Dame economics, with two different sets of standards for tenure review and merit pay raises.

From outside political science it’s difficult to conceive any solid arguments against cultivating the existence of multiple methodologies. Yet Stanford’s David Laitin, who spent 11 years on Chicago’s political-science faculty, has come out explicitly against perestroika and the “hundred flowers blooming” view. In a March 2003 *Politics & Society* essay, Laitin (whose most recent work on a theory of political identities uses a rational choice “tipping model” and large-N statistical analysis to determine whether Russian-speaking persons in former Soviet states will learn their nations’ dominant languages) rebukes perestroikans for having “abandoned the project of a scientific discipline.” He writes, “It would be convenient to write off this quasi-coordinated attack on the scientific turn in the study of society, calling its proponents Luddites. Indeed, their abhorrence of all things mathematical—and their typical but useless conflation of statistical and formal reasoning—reveals a fear of the modern.” But even though the movement lacks “any manifesto offering an alternative view of the discipline,” he believes it “would be prudent to respond, to defend what may well be a Sisyphean project in seeking a science of social life.” (This defense answers perestroikans’ charge that mathematical political-science research lends itself only to trivial findings.)

Laitin chooses as his “intellectual target” *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge), a 2001 book by Danish social scientist Bent Flyvbjerg—not a perestroikan, but who, Laitin says, captures many of perestroika’s core themes. Flyvbjerg, for example, argues that social sciences’ strength lies not in scientific sophistication but in its rich, reflexive analysis of values and power, which he sees as essential to a society’s social and economic development. He calls this reflexive approach “phronesis,” which Laitin equates with the narrative social scientists discover through fieldwork. Yet narrative, Laitin argues, cannot stand alone—it relies too heavily on one person’s interpretation and tends to disregard otherwise counterintuitive facts that can be found only by systematically studying a large number of cases on similar variables. In place of a hundred flowers, Laitin believes political science should cultivate a single hybrid methodology, a three-part approach that begins with fieldwork and narrative, then tests with statistics and formal reasoning.

Laitin also calls for aggressively weeding the garden of research that lacks scientific validity. “[I]f theoretical logic or scientific evidence finds a theory or procedure to be fallacious,” he writes, “that procedure’s flower bed should no longer be

cultivated within the discipline in which it was originally seeded.” In particular Laitin attacks qualitative case studies. Because they select “on the dependent variable,” he says, they “will ultimately lead to faulty inferences about causation.” And he refutes Mearsheimer’s call for diverse departments: “It would be a warping of the scientific frame if we built into the charter of any department of political science that there had to be an expert in ‘realism,’ or in ‘South Asia,’ or in ‘democracy,’ or in ‘qualitative methods.’” In an e-mail conversation Laitin says the bottom line is that he believes in scientific progress. “I’ve worked assiduously at learning new methods when they better help political scientists answer important questions.”

Laitin’s belief that not all methodologies are created equal certainly seems reasonable. Within perestroika a similar red flag has been raised by UC–Irvine’s Kristen Renwick Monroe, a political theorist who once crunched numbers with the best of them, studying econometrics under Nobelists George Stigler and Robert Fogel. Her current work focuses on altruism: why, for example, some people risked rescuing Jews during the Holocaust, a project for which she ditched formal survey methodology for copious informal interviews. “One thing perestroika hasn’t fully addressed is that some techniques are better than others,” she says. “Simply advocating for methodological pluralism is not enough. We need some agreed-upon standards.” Monroe offers a medical metaphor: “We would expect a cancer specialist to tell us which of our treatment options are more likely to lead to recovery. Going down to Mexico and eating lots of apricots is probably not as valid an option as drug therapy.” There’s no reason, she says, that political scientists can’t expect the same rigorous evaluation of methods.

The dilemma, of course, is that political scientists who don’t use hard science may find their work dismissed by rational-choice scholars and statistical modelers before it even reaches the standards test. That’s why Monroe and other perestroikans would like to redraw the lines of debate. “This whole dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative work is misleading,” she says. Susanne Rudolph calls for a discipline that’s problem- rather than method-driven. “I try to imagine a science and an association that is safe for intellectual border crossers,” she said at the 2001 APSA meeting. “People who work on the border are apt to acquire a conceptual creole.” Border-crossers are also open to discovering which method best fits the problem at hand, adds Monroe, rather than deeming at the outset certain methodologies to be superior for their scientific validity.

A problem-driven approach requires not merely open-mindedness, Monroe emphasizes, but also humility. “If our best ideas of yesterday can be shown to be wrong, given better data or improved techniques of analysis,” she says, “then so can our ideas of today. Modesty and science make good bedfellows.” The problem with Laitin’s single, hybrid methodology, she continues, is that it’s “still too imperialistic. It presumes that it will answer all questions raised by a problem and that other methods won’t, when that’s something we can’t really know.” At work on editing *Perestroika, Methodological Pluralism, Governance, and Diversity in Contemporary Political Science*, due from Yale in 2005, she remains optimistic about what perestroika will bring for the discipline. “The issue of science and what we mean by science is on the table in a way that it wasn’t five years ago,” Monroe says. “There are more conversations in departments. Certainly there’s more entrenchment, but there’s also heightened awareness.”

And heightened awareness, the hope goes, will translate into better scholarship over the long run—which, says Mearsheimer, has implications far beyond cluttered professorial offices and cliquish journal review boards. “The work that political scientists do should have an impact on how people outside the discipline think about the world,” he says. “We study important political problems. It’s hard to predict who or which approach will give the best understanding of a problem—important political insights come from all kinds of people and all kinds of approaches. The best thing to do is to create an environment where scholars can use all kinds of approaches, even conflicting ones, and let them go at it.”

Ever the realist, he's quick to add that whether that will happen remains to be seen.



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