

Review - Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning

Written by Dana Gold

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DANA GOLD, APR 22 2015

Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning

By Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006

Within the discipline of political science, and more specifically the sub-discipline of comparative politics, scholars are at often at odds over theoretical approaches and methods of inquiry. The positivist and relativist camps stand at opposite ends of the spectrum with their own ontological and epistemological assumptions about the world. In *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning* Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz set out to examine the various methods within the discipline in order to effectively advocate in favour of a cultural approach, one that is both locally and culturally contextual. With this lens, scholars can gain a broader scope of the overarching conditions within a certain environment before conveying their views on a given issue. Regardless of their sincere rejection of an objective approach to comparative politics, their attempt to offer a “scientific” method is at times confusing and slightly limits their endeavor to propose considering political issues on an interpersonal level. Nevertheless, the authors provide a novel perspective for which scholars can consider a cultural approach within political science.

Chabal and Daloz’s attempt to develop a cultural approach to the comparative study of politics entails explaining events from a local perspective and involves how those concerned make sense of what is happening (4). The authors refer to this as the “interpretation of meaning”, in which translation leads to one’s own understanding. Interpretations, however, can also generate contestation over conflicting accounts. Nevertheless, the authors claim that a cultural approach to comparative politics involves thinking inductively and semiotically (172). Such an approach is well suited to analyzing political events because it attempts to understand culture on a more subjective level. The authors argue that many scholars within the discipline instead attempt to be objective and write accordingly (1), a position with which Chabal and Daloz are troubled. Although within political science one can certainly seek to make comparisons between cases, the authors indicate that generalization should be avoided.

One issue that often arises for scholars of political science is ethnocentric bias since the field largely originated in the Western world (9). Further, the Western experience is often cast over in explaining the development of other nations (215). For example, democracy is a label that is often applied generally and with ease to other regions. In explaining why democracy has failed in some Middle Eastern and African states, political scientists often resort to comparing the Western model to that of third world states. Chabal and Daloz reject such an approach because they imply that it creates a hierarchy as well as a sense of entitlement. The notion of the Western model as the epitome of democratic ideals and a standard for how all other states should function is inherently misleading. The authors instead suggest that scholars should seek to understand each case on its own, as opposed to the approach described above which has often been the norm within political science.

Chabal and Daloz recognize that an in-depth study of cases is not a simple task and may not be feasible in some instances. The cultural approach that they seek to advocate devises “a method that is both able to account for singular experiences and to provide a means of contrasting their evolution” (171). It may be simpler for some scholars to employ the Western model as a prototype from which comparisons can be made to other cases and they

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may even reject the claim that such a method is ethnocentric. It may also be possible that the Western model is most familiar to many scholars, and thus they may believe that comparing and contrasting between cases allows them to better comprehend the political circumstances of other groups and regions in relation to their own. The authors merely call for an attempt to develop an understanding on a case-by-case basis.

Chabal and Daloz advocate a methodological approach that they argue is scientific, and which involves a degree of sensitivity to the relevance of the socio-economic and political context in which individuals live (212). Whereas dominant approaches within the field tend to simplify information, data and historical and sociological accounts, the cultural approach advocated by Chabal and Daloz is quite the contrary. This approach involves the need to widen the scope of research in order to establish the relevant links between a large number of putative variables (182). The authors should be admired for their efforts since it may lead one to question the obsession within the discipline of approximating a “scientific” ideal in which explanations of politics seek to become increasingly systematic. In their conclusion, the authors argue that “Indeed, one of the defects of our discipline (particularly within positivist circles) is the excessive attention devoted to this methodological preoccupation, as though it perennially had to justify its ‘scientific’ credentials” (315). Regardless, it is ironic that the authors argue in favour of an eclectic methodology (34), although a desire to consistently defend a scientific approach remains.

In the second half of the book, Chabal and Daloz focus on the ideas of the state and representation in furthering their arguments regarding how politics in different areas of the world must be understood as culturally contextual. The authors specifically examine three distinct case studies, Nigeria, France and Sweden, in arguing that Europe cannot be compared to Africa (220-221). Chabal and Daloz reason that civil society makes sense in the former and not the latter, thus advancing a cultural approach which may lead one to wonder if and how such an approach may be applied to similar cases in other regions. As Chabal and Daloz suggest, delving into such an investigation involves a clear consideration of all those involved and the issues they face as well as possible factors including religion, culture, ideological beliefs, and values. However, the authors caution an overemphasis of looking at such factors in the study of culture (87). Chabal and Daloz imply that a cultural approach produces a more flexible understanding as opposed to one that is dogmatic, which is detrimental to comparative insight (42). Thus, it is likely that the cultural approach can be appropriately applied to any region around the world when scholars choose to engage in a method that is sensitive to culture, comparable to the one put forth by the authors.

In conclusion, the authors provide a thorough and convincing analysis in favour of a cultural approach that benefits those under study in ways that are often uncommon within the discipline. The authors strive to advance a scientific approach, although they recognize the danger that often leads scholars to simplify and generalize by applying the Western experience hastily and with ease to other cases. Irrespective of slight flaws, the cultural method proposed by the authors provides a voice to those who are often ignored or overlooked particularly in the developing world. By committing to a deeper understanding of other contexts one’s scholarly enterprise may result in an eye opening experience. The task of the political scientist is not solely to explain, but also to comprehend the issues at hand beyond a superficial level. Chabal and Daloz provide their readers with the challenge and the preliminary tools for scholars to embrace a cultural approach within comparative politics.

About the author:

Dana Gold is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Western University in London, Ontario. She is an expert in Middle Eastern politics and has won numerous awards for her research on “Othering” and emotions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the E-IR Article Award for Early Career Scholars. Dana’s work has been published in the *Israel Studies Review* and the *Canadian Journal for Political Science* and she has contributed to two textbooks, *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *International Relations* (2017). You can follow her on twitter.

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