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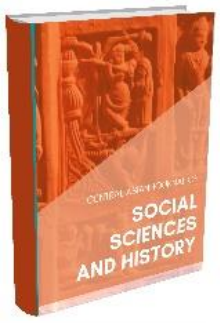

Political Science Paradigms, Methods and Approaches: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract:
The problem of thematic delineation has remained huge in Political Science. Many people are unable to distinguish between paradigm, method and approach, and some others use them synonymously resulting to poor understanding and application. Consequently, this paper thoroughly reviews the terms to show their boundaries and reaches. It maintains that paradigms are loose collections of logically related assumptions, concepts and propositions upon which the analysis of political phenomena is based; thatmethods are systematic processes or strategies for sourcing and treating data for research in Political Science; and that approaches are specific principles or schemes for studying political occurrences. It classifies paradigms intopositivism, interpretivism and pragmatism; methods into analytical, descriptive and mixed methods; and approachesbroadly into traditional and modern approaches such as the legal, philosophical, historical, institutional, systems, structural-functional, political-economy, comparative, behavioral, post-behavioral approaches, among others.

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INTRODUCTION

The normative and empirical beginnings of the study of politics can be traced to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* respectively. But,as a Britishpoliticaltheorist, BernardCrick stresses, Political Science,asadistinctacademicdisciplineandbranchofsocialscience,is an Americaninvention(Arya, 2020). Thus, "the self-definition of Political Science as a science probably onlygoes back a century or so

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(with a convenient dating being the founding of a"scientific" department at Columbia University)"(Beck, 1999, p.1). Since then, Political Science has continued to grow and expand both in scope and methodology, becoming one of the leading disciplines globally.

However, there are a number of issues that fundamentally challenge Political Science as a discipline. The range of Political Science research is said to be wide with boundaries that are often ill- defined, and the discipline itself is, to a considerable degree, thought to be internally fragmented. There is also the notion that Political Science is substantively, not methodologically defined. Thus, political scientists use a variety of methods, and freely draw insights from countless disciplines including Philosophy, History, Economics, Psychology, Sociology and Statistics. In fact, political scientists are said to adopt whatever methodological solutions that are available.

Moreover, there is the problem of thematic delimitation afflicting Political Science. Hence, many themes and or terms such as paradigm, method and approach are often used loosely, interchangeably and in some cases contradictorily resulting to poor understanding and application of these terms. This work, therefore, critically examines the various paradigms, approaches and methods in Political Science. The objective is to clearly differentiate and delineate the boundaries and reaches of Political Science paradigms, methods and approaches.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Categorization constitutes the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this work. In the main, categorization suggests the ability to recognize and properly describe objects, events, or ideas, and organize them into a group, category, class, or type on the basis of their traits, features, similarities or dissimilarities. Categorization can be classified into four variants, namely, classical categorization, prototype theory, exemplar theory and conceptual clustering. Classical categorization attempts to understand objects by grouping them according to their similar properties. The early roots of classical categorization include Plato's grouping of objects based on their similar properties in the 'Statesman'' and Aristotle's differentiation of classes and objects in his 'Categories'. Prototype theory proposes that categorization can be based on prototypes; in other words, learning about the world can be achieved via embodiment. The exemplar theory follows the process by which all known instances of a category are stored in memory as exemplars. To evaluate elements of an entity, potentially relevant exemplars are retrieved from memory and the entity's similarities to those exemplars are established before making a categorization decision (Kruschke, 2008). Under conceptual clustering, classes (clusters or entities) are generated by first formulating their conceptual descriptions and then classifying the entities according to the descriptions (New World Encyclopedia, n.d). Thus, conceptual clustering which derives from attempts to explain how knowledge is represented could be seen as a modern expansion of classical categorization.

Categorization is sometimes considered synonymous with classification. It allows humans to organize things, objects, and ideas that exist around them and simplify their understanding of the world. The activity of categorizing things can be verbal or nonverbal. For humans, both concrete objects and abstract ideas are recognized, differentiated, and understood through categorization**. T**he categorization of objects or ideas is often carried outthrough abstraction of some sorts (Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson & Boyes-Bream, 1976). The process may involve data mining and data sorting. Data mining is the search and aggregation of appropriate data from the gamut of literature that exist, while data sorting is the organization of data in order to make the data-sets more manageable, and be able to identify forms, patterns and meanings, that is, their categories, using a more collective term.

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UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL SCIENCE

There are two component parts of the term, Political Science namely political and science. It is often said that anything that has to do with politics is political. This raises the question, what is politics? David Easton defines politics as "the authoritative allocation of values for a society"(Easton, 1957, p.383). Lasswell and Kaplan (1950, p.6) see politics as "who gets what, when and how". For Ndu (1998), politics is the attempt to resolve the contradictions that arise in human society. Vernon Van Dyke argues that politics is the quest for power, order and justice (Van Dyke, 1969). And for Moa Zedong, politics means war without bloodshed(Britannica, n.d). There may be no generally acceptable definition of politics, but many political scientists would agree that the end of politics is the realization of a well-ordered society. Therefore, politics is not about telling lies, rigging elections, making pompous statements, maligning others or wearing loud cloths or such other vices as are often seen in Nigeria where politics has become a means of fraudulent wealth accumulation. Politics is about selfless service; its object of inquiry includes the search for truth, equity and fairness.

Science is knowledge about any phenomenon acquired by collecting, examining and proving facts. A fact is a piece of information that is known to be true. Simply then, science is an organized body of knowledge established through the gathering and analysis of true or valid facts. Science is commonly divided into the natural and social sciences, and its study is said to be systematic. This means that science has a method or system of study. This is often called the scientific method. What then is Political Science? We can with reasonable validity define Political Science as the academic discipline which systematically studies and analyzes politics. It attempts to understand the political behavior of individuals, groups and societies as well as the factors that affect political actors, events and institutions (Anifowose, 2004). In other words, Political Science deals extensively with the theory and practice of politics.

Political Science is a broad and expanding discipline. Political scientists hardly ever agree on the scope of the discipline. However an attempt was made by the International Political Science Association in Paris in 1948 to delineate the scope of Political Science. It demarcated it into four areas of specialization, namely, Political Theory, Political Institution (Constitution, National Government, Regional and Local Government, and Comparative Political Institution), Political Dynamics (Parties, Groups and Public Opinion), and International Relations (Arya, 2020). But as it is still the case, different institutions classify the study of Political Science differently. The University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, for instance, organizes Political Science discipline into five core areas of specialization, namely, Political Theory and Methodology, International Relations, Nigerian Government and Politics, Development Studies and Public Administration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Paradigm Discourse

The term,paradigm may refer to "a loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts and propositions that orient thinking and research" ((Bogdan & Biklen 1998, p.22). In other words, it is the philosophical and theoretical orientations which determine the approach and method of political analysis. It is a common practice in Political Science to locate research in broad or wide-ranging ontological and epistemological foundations of knowledge. There are three paradigms which can be identified in Political Science, namely, positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism.

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Positivism, which in some cases is called empiricism, argues for the application of the methods of the natural sciences in Political Science. It presupposes the existence of objective reality, the unity of the sciences, and seeks to explain the causal relationship between social phenomena. For positivists, the analysis of social phenomena must follow the 'scientific' method of observation, experimentation, verification, replication and prediction. Observation is the act of viewing or looking at phenomena carefully; experimentation is the testing or examination of any occurrence under controlled condition. Verification means the authentication or confirmation or proof of the truth about anything. Replication is the ability to reproduce the facts of a phenomenon; while prediction is the belief that the truth of anything remains the same anywhere it is seen. The objective of a study of the positivist nature is usually to uncover general causal laws which can be used to explain specific cases and make prediction. The origin of positivism may be traced to Aristotle who gives primacy to matter in his view of reality; however August Comte who stresses places observable data as the basis of true knowledge is seen as the modern architect of the positivist paradigm.

Interpretivism, also called constructivism may have originated from hermeneutics' (the theory of interpretation) and other similar ideas which challenged naturalism, the notion that everything belongs to the world of nature. Edmund Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey are among its pioneers. The interpretivist/constructivist paradigm posits that social phenomena are too complex to be studied using the principles of the natural sciences, in the alternative, the political scientist should interpret or reason in order to reach deeper levels of reality. It attempts to understand "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36), and suggests that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005, p.12). Also, it considers the "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003, p.8) and takes into account the impact of their own background and experiences on the research (Mackenzie &Knipe, 2006). Facts are seen as interpreted or constructed and, therefore social reality is context-specific and self-validating. This means that every social phenomenon is determined by the coherent interpretation of the researcher.

Another paradigm which influences research in Political Science is what is referred to as **pragmatism.** It is increasingly recognized that social reality is something understood by experience and reason. Hence, what Political Science provides is mediated knowledge -– that which comes from a reconciliation of the principles of natural and social sciences. In this way, Political Science is designed to produce knowledge of something further than itself but is forever confined to its own methodology. Logically implied in pragmatism is the belief that knowledge is shaped by experimentation and interpretation. Hence, Political Science should shift from intellectual atomism to eclectic synergism.Pragmatism started in the United States around1870, and its origin is usually credited to Charles Sanders Peirce, who first articulated the view, and William James, who further popularized it (Legg, C., &Hookway, C. (2021). John Dewey also contributed greatly to the development of the idea of pragmatism.

Methods in Political Science

Methods are systematic procedures or strategies for sourcing and evaluating data in research work. In other words, they are procedures or plans that enable political scientists to generate and analyze data about any phenomenon. For Van Dyke (1969), methods denote processes for acquiring and treating data in political inquiry. According to Salvadori, method refers to the technical devices used for gathering [and analyzing] data.It includes the techniques for the collection, selection and scrutiny of evidence in the attempt to understand a phenomenon. There are three methods of political inquiry; these are the analytical method, the descriptive method and the mixed method.

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Generally, **the analytical method** enables theresearcher to examine and clarify concepts, statements, tests and questions teased out from documented materials. Thus, it is the study of recorded human communications such as textbooks, journals, magazines, periodicals and the like. The utility of this method is that it helps researchers to understand the import and purpose of the instruments being analyzed and the intensions of the authors and writers, and also make appropriate inferences. In the view of Robinson (1954), the main goals of analysis are (a) the clarification of ambiguities in concepts for better understanding (b) the weaving of various concepts into a comprehensive whole so as to establish their coherence or relationship (c) the invoking of new questions about certain accepted presumptions, problems and purposes to enable the extension of knowledge. The analytical method is essentially qualitative and inductive. It is qualitative because it relies entirely on the logical abilities, judgment, insight or imagination of the researcher to gather and interpret data. It is inductive in the sense that it is concerned with the generation of new theory from available data. Thus, when a researcher proceeds inductively, he/she starts from particular experiences and moves to a more general set of propositions about those experiences. In other words, inductive reasoning moves from data to theory or from the specificto the general or from part to whole. However, qualitative research can also be done in a deductive fashion, where prior theories or generalizations are tested on new cases (Murphy, Dingwall, Greatbatch, Parker & Watson, 1998).

The descriptive method attempts tofind information about an existing situation with tools such as observations, interviews and questionnaire. The method describes phenomena as they are seen without necessarily providing reasons for the occurrence of such events. Hence, the main feature of descriptive method is that the researcher simply reports what exists about a phenomenon such as characteristics, frequency of occurrence and effects or consequences. It favors the application of the 'scientific method' to the study of political phenomena, and is more empirical, quantitative and deductive. It is empirical and quantitative because it deals with data that are concrete and measurable – data which can be used to describe a variable or variables with the help of statistical tools. It is deductive because it focuses on applying theory to data to test the theory. Researchers who are deductive start with a theory that they find compelling and then test its implications with data. That is, they move from a more general level to a more specific one. The deductive method is usually associated with scientific investigation. Thus, the researcher studies what has been done by others, finds existing theories of thephenomenon being studied, and then tests hypotheses that emerge from those theories (Sheppard, 2020). The descriptive method focuses on answering questions relating to "what" than the "why" of the research subject (Descriptive Research, n.d). Descriptive research designs include surveys, experiments and correlational analyses of different kinds.

The mixed method is a combination of analytic and descriptive techniquesto the study of social phenomena. Thus, the analytical-descriptive method treats data in such a way that on one hand they explain concepts/variables so as to establish their meanings and or relationship, and on the other hand they unravel the characteristics and or effects of the phenomenon or phenomena being investigated. The method accepts the requirement of rigorous descriptive research, but also avoids the temptation to derive results entirely from reported discrete materials without reasonable clarifications and, or inferences (Onyeukwu, 2019). In other words, the mixed-method involves the identification and examination of the variable(s) under investigation.

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Political Science Approaches

An approach to political inquiry may be defined as a specific principle or scheme for studying political phenomena. It is an intellectual lens from which political reality can be viewed. Approachesare ways of looking at and explaining social events, including the points of view of the specialists. According to Vernon Van Dyke, approaches consist of criteria for selecting problems and relevant data whereas methods are procedures for getting and utilizing data (Van Dyke, 1969). Approaches in Political Science may be classified into two categories: the traditional approach and the modern approach.

The traditional approach is value based and emphasizes on what ought to be. The adherents of this approach insist on the inclusion of values to the study of political phenomena. Thus, the study of political science should not be based on facts alone since facts and values are closely related to each other. Since the days of Plato and Aristotle, the great issues of politics have revolved around normative orientations. The issues of larger concern such as how the authority should be organized, what should be the criteria for citizenship, what should be the functions of state etc. are the subject matter of traditional approach. Normative orientations or statements of preferences (value questions) occur frequently in traditional thinking. The traditional thinkers as such do not separate political from ethical questions. Therefore, thinkers like Plato have raised questions like what should be an ideal state, who should rule etc. Traditionalists try to interpret political actions in order to enhance understanding by applying logic. Traditional approaches in Political Science include philosophical approach, historical approach, institutional approach, legal approach etcetera.

Philosophical approach lays emphasis on ethical and normative study of politics and is idealistic in nature. It deals with the issues of the state, leadership, citizenship, rights and duties etc. Philosophy, itself is the search for wisdom, while political philosophy attempts to know the nature of political things and the right or good political order (Leo Strauss, 1989). Consequently, the philosophical approach studies all of man,s political activities with the objective of finding and prescribing the principles underlining those activities (Wasby, 1970). Plato,s *Republic* and Hobbes'*Leviathan* are examples treatises which search for deeper general principles underlying the actual political activities.

Historical approach assumes that political phenomena could be understood better by using the past to explain the present. Historical factors/indicators such as age, date, time, place, situations and so on are critical in historical research. Many political thinkers believe that politics and history are intricately linked and that Political Science should have a historical outlook. In other words, the study of politics should focus on the questions and issues that have been asked and discussed since the time of Socrates and Plato. Thus, the historical approach provides knowledge about any political phenomenon in a sequential order from the past to the present.

Institutional approach lays premium on political institutions and structures like executive, legislature, judiciary, political parties, interests groups etc. Broadly speaking, an institution may be defined as "any persistent system of activities, or any pattern of group behavior; but in concrete terms, it comprises offices and agencies arranged in hierarchy, each agency having certain functions and powers" (Van Dyke, 1969, pp.135-136). Thus, research which is informed by this approach examines the structures, powers, functions and or processes of legitimate institutions of the state. Among the exponents of this approach include James Bryce, Bentley, Walter Bagehot, and Harold Laski. Indeed, formal aspects of government such as the constitution, the organs of government, political parties, and interest groups are the concern of institutional political thought.

Legal approach pays more attention on the laws of the state as well as the enforcement mechanisms

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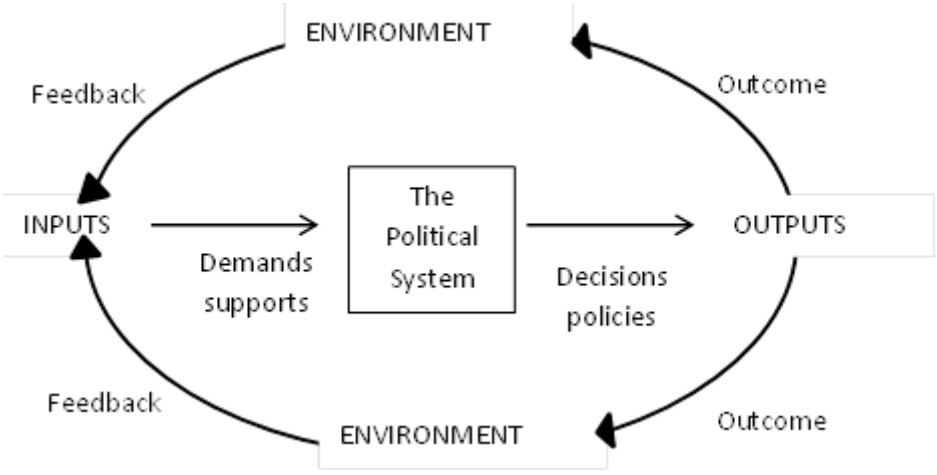
and processes to realizing the objectives and purposes of those laws. Issues such as constitution and constitutionalism are also considered.Thus, the legal lens is usually beamed on the laws, rules and regulations that determine the structure and processes of state/governmental institutions. The advocates of the legal approach include Cicero, Jean Bodin, Jeremy Bentham, Lord Holmes, John Austin, A. V. Dicey and Sir Henry Maine.

The modern approach comprises the attempts to make the study of political phenomena fact-based and value-free. It believes that the adoption of scientific principles in social research will make findings more precise and definite. The modern approach is said to be empirical and focuses on 'what is - rather than what ought to be. It began during the positivist/behavioral revolution in an attempt to make political science more scientific. Today, some political scientists are more interested in analyzing how people behave in matters that relate to the state and government. It is thought that statistical information coupled with the actual behaviors of men, individually and collectively, will help political scientists in arriving at definite conclusions and predicting events correctly in political matters. The modern approach is more inclined towards quantification, and thus deploys statistical tools to political inquiry. Modern approaches include systems approach, structural-functional approach, comparative approach, political-economy approach, behavioral approach, post-behavioral approach etc.

The systems approach attempts to understand how a system maintains itself through its input-output mechanism. Systems analysts, including David Easton believe that because a political system operates within the social environment, it is difficult to effectively analyze political events in isolation of environmental influences. In effect, the systems approach explores the relationship between political life and other aspects of social life. Graphically, the systems approach can be represented thus:



Sources: Anifowose & Enemuo (Eds.), 1999 Enemuo, in Alapiki, 2004

The political system is a subset of the social environment that generates demands with different levels of support. These demands and supports constitute what can be called inputs. These inputs are turned into outputs" (i.e. policies, decisions or laws) through the conversion process. These outputs affect the environment as outcomes, and in turn give rise to fresh demands which flow back into the political system through the feedback mechanism. Ntete-Nna (2004) agrees that a political system is prone to influences from the environment and in turn influences events within its environment.The political

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system at all times receives inputs from the environment and responds to such in the form of outputs. Thus, the whole idea of input-output system becomes an endless cyclical process.

The structural-functional approach proceeds from the premise that the society is a single inter-related system in which each part plays a definite distinct role. In analyzing political phenomena, it considers the functional inter-dependence of the parts that make up the system. Sometimes, emphasis is placed on the whole rather than the parts. In some occasions, the parts are given primacy over the whole. However, the maintenance of the system remains critical for structural-functionalists. Ntete-Nna (2004, p.143) summarizes that the structural-functional approach is not only interested in identifying what structures exist in a given society, what functions they perform and how they perform these functions but also and importantly, the consequences of the relationships which obtain in the society in terms of the survival of the system. The rationale is that all the functions to be performed in any society or system cannot be carried out by one structure or agency.

The comparative approach aims at establishing similarities and differences between and among variables. It has been observed that by comparing and contrasting events, institutions, processes, expectations and experiences, one gets a clearer image of social occurrences. Comparison sharpens our power of description and plays a central role in the analysis of theory. It is also frequently used in testing hypotheses and can contribute to the empirical discovery of new realities.

The political-economy approach is based on the assumption that material conditions are the decisive formative influences on political life, and constitute the bases for discovering and explaining classes and social relations. Political analysts who adopt this approach focus attention on the production and management of public wealth, its distribution and the conflicts that arise from the process. In effect, political economy approach is an integrated strategy for the study of political, economic, legal and moral factors which determine social phenomena.

The behavioral approach emphasizes that the study of political phenomena should be ‘scientific’ and empirical. It began in the United States in the 1950s after the Second World War as an intellectual protest movement against the traditional/conventional approach which it considered as moralistic and unscientific. The proponents of the behavioral approach believe that there are observable uniformities in political behavior which can be translated into generalizations capable of explaining and predicting any political phenomenon. Thus, it is possible to have a science of politics. This involves the systematic gathering of empirical data to test research hypotheses. Put differently, the exponents of behaviorism argue that the only way to understand man is to observe him and record what he does; when, where and how. If enough records are kept, it is possible to predict human behavior in the presence of a recognized stimulus. Thus, the behavioral approach recognizes human behaviorrather than political institutions as the basic unit of analysis, and urges the use of observable, statistical and quantitative data for political analysis.

Post-behavioral approach could be understood from the premise that behaviorism’s emphasis on observable and measurable attitude relegates the need to situate research within its wider context. Post-behavioral supporters feel dissatisfied with behavioral research outcomes as they look more like Mathematics than Political Science, and thus lose touch with social reality. Post behaviorism stresses that research should have relevance to the society and that intellectuals have a significant role to play. The movement believes that the use of scientific tools in Political Science could be beneficial only when it is able to solve the various problems confronting society. It criticizes behavioral approach for ignoring the realities of society while laying too much emphasis on techniques. However it needs to be

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stressed that post- behaviorism is not opposed to everything about behavioral approach. It tries to overcome the drawbacks of behavioral approach by incorporating other approaches that will help in making Political Science more relevant to the society.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Political Science is a dynamic discipline. This is because it deals with societal issues, particularly politics both at the micro and macro levels. The range and substance of the discipline have continued to expand, with the result that the subject matter of Political Science presents both theoretical and methodological problems for the researcher and or analyst. One specific area that has been of utmost concern is the issue of thematic delineation between and among paradigms, methods and approaches. These terms are often used loosely, interchangeably and in some cases confusedlyresulting to poor understanding and application. Consequently, this work is an attempt to properly differentiate the boundaries and reaches of the various paradigms, approaches and methods in Political Science. It contends that paradigms are the philosophical and theoretical orientations which determine the approach and method of political inquiry. While methods are procedures or plans that enable political scientists to generate and analyze data about any phenomenon, approaches are the specific criteria for the selection and utilization of data for political analysis.

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