Theory, Method, and Democracy in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the role of difference in methods and concepts in the social science. The first chapter presents an summarization and defense of two variants of pluralism, methodological and conceptual, in political science. These pluralisms suggest that there is value in engaging with ostensible incommensurabilities across subfields. The second and third chapters extend the analysis to the rest of the social sciences and show how two individuals, Amartya Sen and Avner Greif, may be seen as embodying some of the virtues of the two pluralisms. In the final chapter, the discussion of social scientific practice is tied to a theory of deliberative democracy; this results in a new vision of methodological discussions as a site of democratic deliberation and a new way of understanding democracy as a process of inquiry into one another’s differences.

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1. Methodological Pluralism, Conceptual Pluralism, and Political Science

To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, ‘objectivity’, ‘truth’, it will become clear that there is only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: anything goes.

-- Paul Feyerabend, 1975, Against Method 27-28

Should we adopt a pluralistic approach to the study of politics, and if so, how might it look? These questions are largely the motivation behind this chapter and they have implications for both how we interact as scholars as well as how we think about the prospects for deliberative democracy more generally (as will be discussed in the fourth chapter). I outline and defend two kinds of pluralism within the discipline: methodological and conceptual. Though much has been written about the first, I hold that the second is also vital, as many of our disagreements are not limited to the domain of technique.

After discussing these two types of pluralism in greater detail, I examine some of the underlying implications they have at both the individual and the discipline-wide levels. Though some of the consequences are obviously discussed during the preceding sections, I focus on concrete applications to how politics is studied at the individual level and how differences in both practice and ontology can potentially be resolved. I also begin to discuss the notion of conceptual bridge builders; that is, those who may help transform previously deadlocked debates in a significant manner. Such authors can help us reimagine the terms and imperatives of a given debate, and I focus on two such cases in the following chapters.
Methodological Pluralism

One of the largest topics of debate within political science over the past ten years has been methodological pluralism\(^1\). The now infamous Mr. Perestroika perhaps deserves most of the credit for this debate, as his 2000 e-mail calling into question the prominence of rational choice methods in one of the discipline’s leading journals. Beyond the mere issue of epistemological soundness, Mr. Perestroika also called into question the politics of the American Political Science Association, suggesting that a “coterie” dominated the organization and imposed a single method on the entire field. The Perestroika movement started in the aftermath of the original letter has continued to raise and examine these issues, even gathering attention outside of the boundaries of the discipline from authors such as Alan Wolfe in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The debates spurred by the movement have allowed for a greater amount of disciplinary reflection than what was previously the norm in political science. In addition to the methodological and epistemological concerns raised by Perestroika, the groups has brought to the forefront questions about the structure and sociology of the discipline, particularly regarding the selection of articles in top journals and the way political science is taught. In essence then, Perestroika has raised questions about both the scientific soundness and the political structure of political science.

In addition to the provocative nature of Mr. P’s letters however is the fact that methodology is perhaps the most immediate topic that relates political scientists across their broad subfields. A development expert working in South America, an Americanist specializing in bureaucracy, and an international relations scholar focused on security

\(^1\) See Smiley for a succinct overview.
studies may not be able to discuss their respective topics with each other beyond a superficial level. They may however be able to debate the particular manner which each uses in carrying out these studies. Even if the particular technique each uses differs as much as their respective fields of interest, the underlying question of how one goes about studying politics and societies provides a common framework for discussion.

This then raises the question however of whether there is any specific methodology for carrying out political science. Authors such as Bruce Bueno de Mesquita have long advocated for the primacy of a single approach but an honest appraisal of the field would be unlikely to identify a single way of “doing” political science. Christopher J. Bailey has pointed out that the past fifty years of American politics research has been marked by changes in the dominant approach, ranging from institutionalism to behavioralism to rational choice studies widely utilized today (351-361). While it is certainly true that methodologies may become more prominent than others (the less charitable might suggest that they resemble fads in this way), it seems difficult to argue that any has been completely successful at crowding out the alternatives. Even though both rational choice modeling enjoys a great deal of support in today’s field, one can still find many scholars using completely different methods, including hermeneutical, constructivist, postmodern, Marxist, Frankfurt School, and interpretivist approaches to their own studies of politics. Although these methods may enjoy less prominence in both numbers and recognition, they at least indicate that there still exists a wide variety of research processes in political science.
Given the relative lack of unity within the discipline, the reader may be compelled to ask at this point whether the large collection of tools in the political scientist’s kit thus indicates the presence of methodological pluralism. Even if one concedes that a certain method such as rational choice modeling is prominent or perhaps even dominant, there are still far too many scholars conducting research that is completely antithetical to that approach to suggest that political science is methodologically uniform; as a result it may seem that pluralism exists through sheer diversity alone. I contend however that the mere lack of uniformity of approach is not sufficient for political science to be characterized as methodologically pluralistic. The absence of a truly hegemonic way of carrying out political science research may indicate that there is a variety of methods, but this does not mean the discipline itself is pluralistic. I sketch some brief characteristics required for a discipline that can be characterized this way in the following section.

*Defining Pluralism*

The thicker pluralism I advocate requires at its foundation at least some level of engagement among the various schools of thought in the field. There is likely at least some level of this in political science and in fact in any discipline that enjoys a multiplicity of methods. After all, in creating and supporting contrasting methodologies, scholars will invariably have to define and defend their approach against alternatives. My concern however lies in the fact that that these discussions may occur only in already restricted subfields and schools of thought. In other words, certain approaches are excluded from consideration prior to the start of the conversation.
The engagement I am advocating may be somewhat difficult to characterize. In the final section of this paper, I will outline a few concrete ways it can be increased within political science (and perhaps all social sciences), but at the moment, I would like to at least outline what it is supposed to accomplish. I am not under the naïve impression that simply talking more about how we carry out our research will lead to consensus or yield some optimum form of studying the political world. At the same time however, I am convinced that the current lines in the sand are extremely problematic and fail to convey how differing techniques may complement and not simply contradict each other. Rather than simply having to choose to become a member of say, the rational choice camp or the hermeneutics camp, engagement would potentially help relax the all-or-nothing nature of these boundaries. Even if it does not though, transparently discussing our methods may at least create greater understanding of our differences and reduce the combativeness\(^2\) that can characterize methodological debates.

This is not to say that the current state of political science is such that practitioners must choose only one method and stick to it at all costs. I do not want to set up a straw man portrayal of the discipline in order to justify methodological pluralism, so it would be a mistake to suggest that methodological conflict is more prevalent than it may in fact be. That said, the support Mr. Perestroika received in the aftermath of his first infamous letter nearly eight years ago speaks to the fact that there are stark differences among political scientists, both in terms of representation and method. The more recent debates between Bent Flyvbjerg and David Laitin reinforce the fact that there are clear differences of opinion on the current state of political science methodology and

\(^2\) Though I realize these two do not necessarily always go hand-in-hand.
on its future.\(^3\) One distinctive feature of such debates is persistent misunderstanding; both Laitin and Flyvbjerg repeatedly insist that their opponents either fail to grasp or mischaracterize their respective positions. At best, this can be seen as an indication that one or both sides has simply failed to transparently reveal what they are attempting to do; at worst, this can be seen as one or both sides simply refusing to take seriously whatever alternative vision is being offered. Neither of these conclusions speaks well of the level of engagement currently taking place in political science.

A critic may suggest that I am being too hasty in my criticism of the level of engagement in political science. After all, I have only cited those explicitly engaged in methodological conflict, not those working within the field itself. The recent debate between J. Ann Tickner and Robert Keohane on feminism and international relations seems to suggest otherwise (Tickner 1997, Keohane 1998, and Tickner 2005). Both authors are more renowned for their empirical contributions to the field than they are for debating methodology, yet like Laitin and Flyvbjerg, they both seem to be talking past one another. This is somewhat ironic since at the very core of their conversation is the way previous international relations (IR) scholars and feminists misunderstood one another! Without summarizing the entire debate, I will note that both make valid points about the other’s position, but fail to come to any sort of conclusion. Keohane seems correct that Tickner errs in simplistically contrasting feminists with the researchers that dominate the field, suggesting the former are more historical and humanistic in their approach. As he suggests, a more sophisticated view of science would perhaps utilize a continuum and not strict dichotomies. Yet in her response, Tickner convincingly argues

\(^3\) See Schram and Caterino 17-86 for a summary of the debate and essays by both Laitin and Flyvbjerg.
that feminist scholarship need not rigidly follow Keohane’s positivist guidelines to have any salience for our understanding of international relations; her catalog of feminist IR work demonstrates that feminists can and have contributed to the field, even if they may eschew the traditional methodologies (or even ontologies) of most.

I thus take methodological pluralism to be the disciplinary-wide openness to and engagement with a multiplicity of approaches to the study of the political world. Greater engagement and transparency, two characteristics inherent in this understanding of openness, would allow political scientists to perhaps avoid these misunderstandings that seem to arise whenever methodology is discussed. This is not a simple plea for everyone to “just get along.” The passion with which some support their particular method is not a bad thing in and of itself, and can help foster the general conversation. At the same time though, this should never drown out one’s ability to listen to the rest of that discussion. The variety of methodologies currently within political science should not be frowned upon, but I contend that taking seriously the various claims and attributes of such methods is necessary for a pluralistic discipline.

*Defending Methodological Pluralism*

What about those who see the many practices in political science as a negative and not a positive? Should we not be aiming for a single, coherent paradigm so that we may progressively practice normal science? In this section, I will respond to these claims, highlighting some other positive features of pluralism as well as some negative aspects of an imposed single approach. The first response I have to such questions is to ask one of my own: which single way of doing political science would my interlocutor
take as the best? There are many who may see their methodology as the only way of conducting legitimate political science research, but I will take aim at logical-empiricists, whose work is the closest to dominating the field. Those who support alternative approaches such as interpretivism may express similar sentiments, but for the sake of succinctness I will focus on one group. ⁴

Logical-empiricism is most often associated with the school of rational-choice within the discipline of political science. Logical-empiricists hold that scientific understanding can be gained if and only if hypotheses, derived from a strictly axiomatic theory, are subjected to rigorous empirical testing; this is also known as the deductive-nomological model. The deductive theory that serves as the source for testable hypotheses is meant to avoid the problem of causation by logically demonstrating the relationship between the independent and dependent variables; in this way then, logic mirrors the natural world.

The deductive-nomological model has several problems. First, it takes explanation as equivalent to prediction. This is problematic insofar as generally accepted theories, even in the natural science, may explain without predicting. While prediction may be useful for determining a theory’s explanatory power, it does not merit being the sole metric. A second issue, as Alex Wendt points out in his Social Theory of International Politics, is the fact that placing an event or phenomenon under a covering law may not actually explain why it has occurred. Wendt cites the democratic peace theory as one instance of this: “In what sense have we explained peace between the US and Canada by subsuming it under the generalization that ‘democracies don’t fight each

⁴ But also see Shapiro 4-9 and Shapiro and Wendt 31-37.
other? When what we really want to know is why democracies do not fight each other, to answer the question in terms of still higher order laws merely pushes the question one step back” (81).

Though these may be flaws with the model, it is not an inherently “wrong” way to conduct political science research. After all, it encourages the formulation of both well-formulated hypotheses and rigorous empirical testing. Problems arise however when we try to impose it as the only way of carrying out scientific research. Wendt suggests the deductive-nomological model was originally intended to be a model of scientific logic, not the single way of carrying out studies (Social Theory, 79-80). Imposing the deductive-nomological model can have negative effects on social scientific inquiry, particularly by crowding out particularistic studies in favor of what can be generalizable across cases. As Wendt’s second criticism above suggests, this may prevent us from ever recognizing localized causes in our quest for universal laws. I see generalized theories and laws as potentially useful instruments in the study of politics, but do not believe they should be the end result of our efforts. Case and small-N studies may substantially increase our understanding of the political world, even if they do not result in universal laws.

In practice, logical-empiricism has resulted in a host of additional problems. Ian Shapiro and Donald Greene’s Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory suggests that political scientists often use theories that are reconcilable with any empirical reality. They evaluate the record of rational choice scholarship within the field of political science and find it lacking across the board. Even if one holds that prediction and
explanation are symmetrical, rational choice theories are constructed in such a
generalized fashion that they add very little to our actual understanding of the political
world. Greene and Shapiro suggest that others engaging in rational choice research may
fail to consider alternative explanations or simply alter their theories to fit the empirical
result after the fact. They believe that this attempt to conduct political research
scientifically has resulted in bad science. Thus, in practice, the application of the
deductive-nomological model seems to have created a situation where researchers appear
more inclined to circle the wagons and vindicate their approach, even at the expense of
strong empirical work.

Though I am perhaps a bit more sympathetic to the record of rational choice than
Greene and Shapiro, they make an important point about why neither rational choice, nor
any method should attain hegemonic status within the field: political science should be
problem-driven, not method-driven. This is an important distinction insofar as scientists
wedded to any single methodology will be more likely to find problems vindicating its
premises and see the results of empirical tests through only one frame. Indeed, if
rational-choice or in fact any other methodology came to dominate the field, the scope of
what could be studied would be noticeably smaller. I am not so naïve to suggest that one
can ever completely divorce one’s recognition of problems from one’s theoretical ideas;
as philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn have often pointed out, all observation
is theory-laden. As researchers however, we should be primarily concerned by
explaining anomalies and events within the political sphere, not simply scoring points for
our chosen methodology. Few if anyone who chooses to study political science does so

\[5\] See Shapiro (2005) pp. 86-96 for the fullest discussion of this distinction.
out of an interest in rational choice theory; rather most wish to learn how or why political events occur. Method should therefore be seen first and foremost as a tool used for that process of exploration.

There is one final charge I wish to defend methodological pluralism from before moving on, which is the idea that what I propose would allow anything and everything to be characterized as political science. This critique calls to mind Popper’s efforts to distinguish science from non-science and his suggestion that the non-falsifiability of Marxism and psychoanalysis constituted pseudoscience. For Popper, ideas such as false consciousness fail to make any prediction about reality and can thus be used to reconcile any theory with the empirical result (8). This is a serious challenge to my methodological pluralism, as how can it be said to advance the state of political science while letting all sorts of faulty research through the door? My response to this charge is to note the engagement component I outlined above. Increased engagement allows us not only to come to terms over our differing ideas of how to study the world, but also may help crowd out bad science. If we simply choose not to care what those not working within our own methodology are doing, than we allow all sorts of potentially poor research to share the name of political science. If however we make an effort to understand each other’s work across paradigms, than we may also be able to spot and discourage bad research. Deliberation can also produce fruitful criticism and allows us to reflect on our own approaches. This strikes me as a more scientific way of studying the world than simply blanketing the discipline with a universal approach.
Even if one does not accept my arguments about methodological pluralism and engagement, I believe what I advocate is still useful for helping make political science more problem-driven. A discipline that encourages and embraces a variety of approaches prevents the domain of research from being necessarily restricted from the very beginning. Political scientists are interested in an extremely wide variety of events and areas, ranging from systematic understandings of the international system all the way down to how and why a person may choose to vote. It makes little sense to see how imposing one methodology on scholars working throughout this huge range of problems would significantly improve their studies. Additionally, shrinking or eliminating the boundaries we may use to differentiate our methods from one another would allow us to focus on the questions that actually motivate our interest in political science in the first place. Rather than serving as an identifier, methods would instead be seen as tools helpful or unhelpful for explaining or understanding a particular phenomenon. Thus, at a more basic level than the understanding I believe it could help facilitate, methodological pluralism allows researchers to study the world without forcing them to do so in a single manner from the start.

**Conceptual Pluralism**

In supporting methodological pluralism, I do not want to give the impression that technique alone is the only thing about which separates political scientists into different camps. While technique is important, there are often conceptual disagreements which are both a cause of and result of that methodological disagreement. What this means is that it
is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to parse out one’s ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

Conceptual disagreements seem far more problematic to the study of politics than those that are strictly methodological. After all, I may demonstrate that a particular statistical method provides a better fit to the data than the one you advocate, or you may be able to convince me that historical institutionalism provides a fuller account of economic growth than its rational-choice cousin. Concepts however relate to the very nature of the world and thus seem more zero-sum then methodological arguments. After all, freedom is either equivalent to sovereignty or it is not. Unobservables can either be said to exist or they do not. It is difficult to point to a criterion we can agree to that will ultimately settle our ontological disputes; indeed, it may be difficult to fully understand each other’s ways of seeing the world beyond the most superficial level.

I do not mean to suggest that conceptual disagreements are completely the same as the ontological kind, but they are relatively close. Despite these seemingly insurmountable pitfalls to both engaging and understanding our conceptual differences, I advocate pluralism in this realm as well. In this section, I first show how important ontological disagreements may be in our study of political science. After that, I defend conceptual pluralism on several grounds, some similar to my defense of methodological pluralism, some not.

Why Ontology Matters

As mentioned above, ontology often has been difficult to distinguish from both methodology and epistemology. Steve Smith has suggested that methodology is the
justification for the use of a particular method, epistemology is how we distinguish between true and false, and ontology is what the world is like (42-43). This is a relatively conventional way of distinguishing the three terms, though as Smith points out, they are interrelated; “…just as epistemology is important in determining what can be accepted ontologically, so ontology affects what we accept epistemologically” (43).

It can be difficult to grasp how or why conceptualizations ultimately matter for political science research. After all, it is often discussed in extremely abstract terms and is rightly more often debated in philosophy departments. At the same time though, our conceptualizations are crucial for how we carry out political science research. If I wish to demonstrate that economic growth has a causal relationship with the development of democracy, it matters how I conceive of both of these variables. This may seem like a matter of operationalization alone, but it also involves a prior defining and understanding of what those terms actually entail. Is economic growth the simple aggregate wealth of a country or does it also entail country’s comparative success? Is democracy a formalized political system based on popular representation, or does it have more stringent requirements? I maintain that prior to all of the quantifications or intersubjective definitions are crucial conceptual matters that may be stimulating or at least reinforcing our subsequent disagreements.

A persistent criticism of the social sciences is that they fail to operate as objectively as the natural sciences, despite the fact that there is no inherent reason why this should be so. In the “The Value-Oriented Bias of Social Inquiry,” Ernest Nagel makes precisely this case, suggesting that the social sciences can and should be value-
neutral. Nagel’s third argument in particular suggests that, contra those who would suggest otherwise, fact and value can be successfully divorced from each other in conducting social science research. He particularly holds that even when dealing with values, it is possible to divide appraising value judgments, which pass judgment, from characterizing value judgments, which simply express the degree to which some attribute is present (490-492). Thus, sociologists may potentially suggest a society is mercenary without necessarily passing judgment on it, despite the general connotations of the term (493-494). If social scientists focus exclusively on objective facts and characterizing value judgments, the social sciences may progress like their natural counterparts. A large part of Nagel’s arguments rests on the intersubjective understanding of the value judgment; characterizing judgments need to be “commonly recognized (and more or less clearly defined)” (492).

The problem with Nagel’s argument is twofold: first it is difficult to think of many statements that are strictly characterizing within the social sciences and second, there may be an extremely limited number of usable terms that have achieved a high enough level of intersubjective agreement. Despite the fact that sociologists may be attempting to study mercenaries in a value-free way does not mean that the terms used in their efforts are automatically strictly characterizing. Consensus alone does not mean we can or should simply ignore the conceptual character of what we study or treat such variables as equivalent to fact. This does not automatically mean values pollute everything social scientists may wish to discuss, but it does indicate that there is a far greater amount of normative content behind the concepts positive researchers may use
than often assumed. In the following chapter, I discuss the work of Amartya Sen, who has shed a great deal of light on this issue in the field of economics.

My second criticism of Nagel lies in the fact that many subjects social scientists may wish to study lack the level of agreement he seems to require. The democracy variable mentioned above can be seen as a good example of this. The question of what brings about the establishment of democratic institutions can be seen as perhaps one of the most important issues political scientists study, especially for its potential real world effects. Yet it is unlikely that there is enough agreement about what constitutes democracy beyond the superficial idea of majority rules. Should we throw out the research done in this area and ignore future studies on the basis of their being unscientific? Unless we want to risk letting value-laden research into the discussion, this is the decision we face. I fear that Nagel ultimately risks throwing out a good deal of useful (if contested) scientific research with the bathwater of subjectivity.

One final illumination of how concepts and ontology help shape our studies of political science can be found through the work of Alex Wendt. I cited Wendt above for his criticism of the deductive-nomological model. One of his major goals in his Social Theory of International Politics is to offer an alternative to the divide between positivists and post-positivists in the field of international relations. He does this by offering a version of constructivism founded on scientific realism. In outlining and defending his position, Wendt suggests that it is superior to its alternatives: “Scientific realism corrects philosophies of science which say all explanations must conform to a single model, but otherwise leaves science to the scientists” (Social Theory, 83). Given my defense of
methodological pluralism above, I certainly agree with this sentiment of allowing scientists to go about doing their work. At the same time, to get to this point, Wendt outlines a complex ontology that may cause both empiricists and post-modernists to want to walk away from the discussion. He was certainly aware that ontology matters far more than perhaps is currently assumed in political science debates. Indeed, he believes the current discussions center far too much on epistemology at the expense of ontology and he has criticized the ontological status of certain elements in other IR theories (Agent-Structure, 337-349). Wendt’s own ontological positions regarding the nature of unobservables and social kinds may be precisely what alienates others looking to his work. He takes the international system as an objective reality, but one that it is constituted by ideas all the way down (Social Theory, 51-60 and 113-131). Post-positivists will likely be troubled by the first point, despite agreement on the importance of ideas. Empiricists will agree that the international system can be objectively studied, but will part ways with Wendt on the point of idealism (Social Theory, 90-91). Thus, a rejection of his position is perhaps bizarrely a reinforcement of his broader point about the importance of ontological and conceptual disagreements.

Defending Conceptual Pluralism

Defending a pluralism of concepts in a way similar to how I discussed methods may seem untenable. After all, is it really possible that continued engagement on these unobservable ideas can possibly lead to the reconciliation we may reasonably hope for when discussing methods? It would seem unlikely and the current indifference to issues of this sort that seems to be prevalent within the field would thusly be justified. I contend
however that the unlikeliness of true agreement should not be taken as a strict indication that engagement is not worthwhile, and in some cases, can serve as an even greater imperative for that very process. I elaborate on this point more generally in the final chapter, but here I restrict the discussion to the familiar realm of political science research. In addition to this point regarding engagement, I also defend the more moderate position that no single ontology should automatically be elevated in the discipline.

Though conceptual pluralism, complete with the transparency and deliberation similar to the kind I discussed above, may initially seem futile due to the zero-sum nature of such disagreements, it can also yield bridges across our traditional camps in political science. We may never reach broad agreement about the nature of the world through engagement about our differing concepts. The actual meaning of terms like freedom, consent, or even economic growth may remain wide open after all of the debating in the world. Such conversations seem the stuff of philosophy departments and ultimately a distraction from the carrying out of our actual research. Thus, conceptual debates appear unlikely to end in any satisfying resolution and may often be accompanied by high opportunity costs.

It is my position however that the resolvable/irresolvable dichotomy is a poor metric for evaluating how worthwhile a given debate may be. Even if our positions may not be fully commensurable, it seems highly problematic to simply make a declaration of perfect or complete incommensurability and return to our separate quarters. I further hold that in some cases of insurmountable conceptual disagreement, engagement can still
be useful, as it can at least help us understand better the differences in our own positions. I may never be able to see things exactly as you do given the distance between our positions, but I can at least gain an approximate understanding of how great that distance is. Although conceptual pluralism may not offer political scientists a large toolkit that they can use to go and study the world the way methodological pluralism can, it does offer a way of thinking about how both ourselves and others understand it.

A second reason for encouraging conceptual discussion is the fact that though our debates themselves may not allow us to come to any sort of agreement, we can still possibly reach terms for settling the debate empirically. This does not mean that simply looking at the facts of the cases at hand will result in one or both sides changing their positions; if this was the case, it is unlikely that there would have been such a divide in the first place. Rather, as Shapiro and Wendt note, “Part of the business of science is to devise criteria by reference to which we can adjudicate apparent incommensurabilities” (21-22). The engagement I am supporting then need not end in complete agreement or disagreement, but can instead yield map of how we may eventually be able to resolve the issue. This should also alleviate the fears of those who think I have strayed too far onto the philosophers’ turf, as deliberating about our abstract or conceptual differences can still produce new avenues of worthwhile research.

A final reason to support conceptual pluralism is the analogous argument that just as no single methodology deserves an anointed place of privilege in political science, so too does no single ontology. This is perhaps somewhat less controversial than the

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6 Though I do realize that the notion that we may empirically resolve our conceptual disagreements implicitly supports a particular ontological position.
methodological viewpoint I offered for two reasons. First, conceptualizations are somewhat less contested than they are in political science simply because they are not discussed as much. While many may think they have the right or proper understanding of how the world actually is, the only attempts to impose one onto the discipline writ large occur in conjunction with methodological pushes. A second reason this may be the case is that arguing that political science research must necessarily be accompanied by a single ontology is fairly difficult. Perhaps the closest push for this came from the behavioralists with their insistence that we should focus on observables above all else. Yet it would be a very tall task to convince others that there is only one way to understand freedom, equality, or the nation-state for instance. Those arguing for such positions would likely be marginalized within the discipline. This is not to imply that all concepts receive equal time or are respected within the field, but differing ontologies do not seem to be as combated as methodologies are. To the extent that political scientists continue to operate with radically different conceptualizations then, a necessary (though once again not sufficient) condition of conceptual pluralism is already in place.

**Implications and Closing Remarks**

This section examines a few implications of the pluralisms I have outlined at both the individual and the discipline-wide level. I do not have all the answers about how to move from the current state to one that embraces and engages methodological and conceptual differences. I do hope however to offer at least a few concrete prescriptions that may serve to improve the many ongoing discussions in political science. This section also includes some concluding remarks on the issue of meritocracy.
The Two Pluralisms and Individuals

One may be under the impression that my vision of pluralism means that individual researchers must necessarily utilize multiple methods or different conceptualizations. This would be an inaccurate interpretation of what I have recommended thus far. I encourage individuals to loudly advocate their own positions at both of these levels. Such advocacy is a vital component of the dialogue at the heart of my argument. A market of ideas requires those who will promote their own ideas. I repeat my previous caution though that this promotion should never crowd out one’s ability to both listen to and struggle with the alternative visions others may present. That said, it would seem highly problematic to produce a study that makes use of a multiplicity of methods without compelling reasons for doing so; this may earn the scientist brownie points with researchers in various camps, but would lack epistemological justification. Indeed, this could be seen as another example of method-driven research, as the scientist in this case appears to be placing a higher priority on methodological pluralism than the content of the problem at hand.

This problem ties into the transparency I have written about above. Both of the pluralisms require clear explication about the methods and concepts used in one’s studies. I do not mean to force political scientists to justify at length in every single article their complete set of reasons for both conceptualizing and approaching the subject in a certain way. Indeed, I feel a good deal of the engagement I have discussed can be achieved through methodological and ontological self-reflection. Though this may initially seem to have a paralyzing effect (more opportunity costs from such philosophical tangents), it
can also lead to a clearer thinking about what the problem being studied is and how one hopes to understand it. This clarity can translate into one’s actual written work, as similarities and differences with other researchers working on the topic may be more precisely articulated. That said, while the explication of one’s conceptualizations and methods need not take up most of what one writes, at least slightly more attention could be paid to such discussions in the future.

A final note I would like to make regarding the pluralisms and individuals relates to what I call bridge-builders. These individuals serve as perhaps the best evidence for continued engagement in the face of differences, as they synthesize contrasting positions in a debate and in the process help transform its contours. Theories seen as previously incommensurable may find common ground through such work and methodologies can become integrated in new and exciting ways. Bridge-builders may be seen as encompassing the values of the two pluralisms at an individual level, as they attempt to reveal that methods and concepts once seen as perfectly incommensurable with each other may overlap in important ways. This is not to suggest that bridge-builders simply end the conversation by uniting once disparate theories or approaches under a common header; instead, they reveal how continued engagement, even when there appears to be little chance of complete agreement, may uncover at least some areas of overlap and yield new perspectives on the debate. Wendt’s effort to craft a social constructivist theory of international relations is perhaps one example of this bridge-building in action. In the process of presenting his theory, he wrestled with the efforts of previous writers from a wide variety of schools. Though the debate among realists, liberals, constructivists, and
others within international relations has hardly been resolved, Wendt’s work has challenged scholars across the board and forced a reconsideration of some long held premises. In the following two chapters, I consider the work of two other writers I see as bridge-builders: Amartya Sen on freedom and development and Avner Greif on defining and studying institutions.

*The Two Pluralisms and the Discipline*

Most of my discussion about methodological and conceptual pluralism has implicitly been about the discipline of political science as a whole. Yet the skeptical reader may wonder what all this talk about engagement really produces. After all, political scientists talk to each other all the time, through both written and face-to-face encounters. Even if one does accept that the deliberation that does occur is not sufficiently reflective about methodological and conceptual differences, how exactly are we supposed to get to that point? I confess that I cannot fully respond to either of these challenges, but I will sketch a few ideas about political science as it is currently practiced.

The first relates back to the contributions of the Perestroika movement. Since the time of Mr. Perestroika’s letter regarding criticizing the state of the *American Political Science Review* significant changes have been made to the journal’s review process; furthermore new journals oriented more towards qualitative work have also been created. This is certainly a positive development towards allowing greater access to the pages of the discipline’s flagship publication. I will also note that it is perfectly reasonable for supporters of the Perestroika movement to seek out new or alternative venues for their work if they find the American Political Science Association

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7 The aforementioned article by Wolfe documents some of these changes.
uncooperative; this would also call into question whether any journal deserves flagship status. I will caution however that more equal access to resources such as journal pages does not guarantee the engagement I encourage. Indeed, if all the quantitative people read and write for their own set of journals while the qualitative camp has their own set, then engagement will seem somewhat futile. We cannot force anyone to be up to date on every area of political science, but it is also dangerous to the discipline if, on top of the methodological and subfield boundaries already present, we also end up creating and solidifying similar divisions among the journals.

A second issue I wish to consider is education. This is perhaps an even more crucial stage for ensuring the kinds of conversation I advocate. Although efforts to engage our fellow political scientists on methodology and concepts may fall on deaf ears, the next generation of scholars need not fall to the same fate. In teaching those future political scientists then, I believe it is crucial that we avoid erecting a uniform curriculum similar to the Samuelsonian kind in economics. There is and should be no single way of teaching political science and this should be seen as a feature and not a bug. Demonstrating the many ways those who study politics may differ in their work can help produce practitioners who will be similarly inclined to explore the various divisions across the discipline. Additionally, while this approach may lose in appearing scientific, it gains in engaging students’ minds. Gerald Graff has noted that teaching the debates in any field can help yield better writing and more importantly, a better understanding of the discipline’s features (83-95). Rather than simply being another boring subject that presents a discrete set of facts about a given political unit, teaching the debates would
help present political science as part of an ongoing intellectual conversation. This is a completely logical move, as undergraduates interested in political science in the first place have likely enjoyed thinking about and discussing politics prior to entering campus. A presentation of the various differences political scientists have about the world would help these students become participants in the intellectual discussion right off the bat.

One final note I would like to make relates to the decisions graduate students and new professors end up facing. The “publish or perish” atmosphere exists throughout academia and is not unique to political science. I do not have a grand idea to replace the perverse and often baffling incentive system young scholars may face. I will note however that we should be extremely careful to prevent this state from drowning out potentially new ideas. This makes the journal issue doubly important, as the careers of new scholars are largely dependent on their ability to publish their work. New professors can potentially be the most likely to build bridges across disciplinary divides and it is vital that we do not overlook their work or demand they conform to more traditional modes of research. Above all else, the pluralisms require continued expression of alternative viewpoints, and this is the level where they are most in danger of being suffocated. Though the current state of political science journals and the requisites of tenure cannot be reformed by any single current scholar, the training and socialization of graduate students can at the very least help them avoid producing political science for the sake of a secure job alone.
Concluding Remarks

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to outline and defend two kinds of pluralism within political science. I tried to justify both pluralisms by suggesting that it seems problematic to attempt to impose a single methodology or conceptual scheme upon all of political science, as doing so would seem to limit both the scope of problems that may be studied and the tools that can be used to do so. In making these arguments however, perhaps I failed to fully consider the benefits of going in the other direction and establishing a single paradigm to govern all of political science. After all, while it may potentially be accompanied by the limitations I outlined above, it could also simplify many of our disputes and allow for the practice of normal science. A supporter of this view might also argue that we should adopt an approach to political science that can best explain and predict the phenomena we choose to study; in this sense, they are making a case for meritocracy within the study of political science.

I will respond in full to this view in the closing chapter of the book. I will note at this time that even if we can establish a metric of merit for methodologies and conceptual schemes in political science (a claim which I am fairly dubious about), there still may be reasons to resist a complete harmonization of the discipline. In chapter four, I will draw a parallel between the two pluralisms discussed above and deliberative democracy. In doing so, I attempt to establish that beyond the immediate instrumental value the pluralisms may provide to social inquiry, they also hold political value. As a result, even if one concludes that a diversity of approaches is inefficient for understanding the
political world, there still may be reason to be hesitant about imposing a hegemonic
technique and understanding on the entire discipline.
2. Amartya Sen on Freedom and Development

In this chapter, I outline how Amartya Sen may be seen as what I have called a bridge-builder in the area of political philosophy. Sen’s capabilities approach represents an original contribution to the field that also manages to engage and synthesize the ideas of previous thinkers. This may not sound like entirely radical or innovative, but I hold that Sen manages to help reconfigure and reframe previously stagnant debates. His work is thus a testament to the practice of the two pluralisms I discussed in the previous chapter.

While Sen attempts to balance and explore multiple contentious concepts in the area of political philosophy, I focus particularly on his discussion of freedom. Freedom is perhaps the cornerstone of contemporary liberal thought, with a wide variety of thinkers exploring its justification, implications, and above all its meaning. Discussions of freedom then would seem to have the potential to result in a great deal of talking past one another and may abruptly end with an early declaration of incommensurability. I begin this chapter by considering some of the problematic binaries surrounding freedom that could result in inert discussions. After reviewing some of these dichotomies, I examine Sen’s work on freedom, emphasizing both the novelty of his own approach and how he may be seen as offering one way around the pitfalls that may arise in debating freedom. I also consider some of the broader implications of Sen’s work beyond his study of freedom. Finally, I discuss some objections to Sen’s work, demonstrating that while he may have transformed the conversation, he by no means has ended it.
Problematic Binaries of Freedom

Freedom is not just a concept that concerns political philosophers, but is also an idea that has a good deal of influence over how we may debate political issues in the United States. We may often hear politicians invoking their commitment to freedom or activists fighting for unprotected or violated freedoms. The contested nature of freedom can often be seen in these non-academic discussions as well and can even become an issue at the voting booth. One example of this can be seen through the smoking bans many states and cities have put to vote in the last few years. Freedom is a fundamental point of contestation for both sides in these debates. Would such an initiative violate my right as a smoker to use cigarettes in a public place or as a business owner to determine my own policies? Or does failure to pass such a ban violate your right to breathe clean air in a public place? Similarly, the universal healthcare debate may also be framed as an argument about freedom. Does my right to avoid involuntarily subsidizing others’ healthcare trump your right to procure a certain amount of medical relief?

These two examples illustrate how, despite its frequent citation by speakers and writers across the entire political spectrum, freedom cannot easily be pinned down as a definite concept. We may arrive at radically different ways of weighing the rights of non-smokers and smokers, as well as business owners and employees. We may also have fundamentally different ideas about whether universal healthcare represents a case of coerced taxation or is instead a matter of provisioning a separate fundamental right. There seems to be no single unifying paradigm informing everyone’s thoughts on freedom in neither the academic nor non-academic world. Beyond the mere content of
freedom, we may also disagree on why it matters in the first place. Should we view rights as fundamental and naturally bestowed upon all people, or instead as simply being important to the extent that they help produce positive outcomes in a society? Is freedom a valuable end in itself, or instead a means to some other desirable result? Even if we do come to some sort of agreement about both the content of and justification for freedom, we still may be left with the question of implementation. How could we ever possibly measure the extent of freedom in a given society? Should we focus on the formal processes that attempt to assure the availability of freedom? Or should we instead consider the actual opportunities people have to achieve some outcome? In the following sections, I consider how our debates about freedom’s content, justification, and evaluation may easily lead to seemingly irresolvable dead ends. I suggest that these dead ends stem from problematic dichotomies about freedom in each of these three aspects, leading to either/or situations that provide little room for further discussion.

Positive and Negative Freedom

Perhaps the most immediate binary of freedom is most frequently associated with Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Berlin suggests that there are two notions of how freedom may be framed. The first, negative liberty, suggests freedom is present to the extent that there are no external interferences with one’s activity (122). Freedom in this sense is conceived of as depending on the absence of coercion; a lack of liberty cannot result from one’s own internal inability to accomplish a certain goal or perform a given task. This conception of freedom as non-interference can be contrasted with positive liberty. Rather than being based on the absence of coercion, the positive view of
freedom is instead founded on the presence of self-determination (131-132). An individual’s freedom in this case is based on the extent to which he is in control of his own decisions. These two concepts may not sound very divergent at first glance, but positive liberty brings forth internal concerns absent in its negative counterpart. After all, factors beyond strictly external obstacles may prevent an individual from ultimately achieving self-mastery. Additionally, positive freedom may be cited as a justification to bring forth some basic level of self-sufficiency in way that negative freedom may not.

Indeed, the universal healthcare debate noted above may be crudely broken down into a conflict between positive and negative liberty. I may see myself as having the freedom from involuntarily paying for the provision of healthcare while you may see yourself as having the freedom to a certain amount of medical care.

It is thus easy to see how these two views of freedom may quickly become incompatible with one another. State interventions can be seen as a tool to help provide positive freedoms to members of a given society, while they may also be framed as infringements upon one’s negative freedom from government interference. Arguments based on this dichotomy can quickly become stagnant, as there is no proof or formula to convince the opposing side that its view of freedom is mistaken and there is little wiggle room to reach a compromise. We may be inclined then to simply end the discussion upon this realization. We could decide to put clashes between positive and negative freedoms to a vote, but even if that does “determine” the matter, little effort has been made to actually understand each other’s positions. In such cases, one side will ultimately feel that its right to self-determination or its freedom from external
interference has been violated. Discussing the content of freedom may thus seem to be a futile endeavor with little room for persuasion or understanding.

*Freedom as Means and Freedom as End*

A second problematic binary that may arise in discussions of freedom is the question of why we should care about it in the first place. One view suggests that freedom is important to the extent that it makes other people happy or results in some other desirable consequence. This position holds freedom then as the mere means to another end; freedom is only important to the extent that it helps realize that particular goal. An alternative perspective suggests rather than simply holding instrumental value, freedom has intrinsic value. It is thus worth pursuing as an end and should be treated merely as a tool for the fulfillment of some other goal. Rights in this case may be seen as basic and inherent to every individual, regardless of whether or not they live in a society that protects those freedoms. It is important to note that proponents of this position may not deny that freedom can help promote things like happiness, but instead suggest that its protection and justification should not rely on the extent to which it does so.

This particular binary mirrors the philosophical debate between deontological and consequentialist ethics. Here too we may imagine how proponents of both sides may simply end the discussion with a declaration of incommensurability. Once again there is no single ontological criterion we can point to that will help settle our dispute about the value of freedom. Your contention that certain kinds of speech lead to unhappiness and should thus be regulated will not deter me from my position that freedom of speech is a
fundamental and universal right. Such disagreements also appear to be zero-sum and can end as unsatisfactorily as disagreements about the content of freedom.

_The Process and Opportunity Aspects of Freedom_

The final binary I examine has actually been articulated by Sen himself and relates to how we may wish to implement or evaluate freedom in a particular society. This dichotomy is also closely related to the previous discussion of justification, though I hold that it is actually a separate distinction. In considering the level of freedom in a given state, we may be inclined to look at the formal processes present or absent. Examining freedom in this manner places a great deal of emphasis on whether or not political freedoms, such as speech and voting rights, are protected. A second metric for evaluating freedom focuses on the actual opportunities people may or may not have. This opportunities approach is concerned with the real circumstances people actually encounter in a given society, not the formal rules and procedures. As a result, it may be seen as connected to the instrumentalist view of freedom discussed previously; both have an overt concern with consequences (Sen 17). This divide may not seem as irreconcilable as the two preceding binaries, but it can still be difficult to overcome. We may easily become attached to one of the two aspects and fail to see the relevance of the other when debating the extent of freedom. If I am committed to the process aspect, I may easily overlook the opportunities citizens may or may not have in favor of a consideration of codified rights. Furthermore, I may believe the existence of those opportunities has little to do with actual degree of freedom in that society. The way we
attempt to measure or promote freedom can therefore also easily produce starkly different ideas with little room for a middle ground.

**Amartya Sen as Bridge-Builder**

In this section I explore how Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach may offer a way around some of these problematic binaries and transform the debates about freedom. I first provide a brief overview of Sen’s work on freedom and its place in his broader work on development before discussing how he may be seen as a bridge-builder.

**Sen’s View of Freedom**

In *Development as Freedom*, Sen argues for a freedom-based view for the production and evaluation of development. At the core of his approach is the idea of freedoms as capabilities and those resulting functionings as the primary end of development. He notes, “A person’s ‘capability’ refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve” (75). Sen contrasts both these aspects with traditional economic understandings of freedom and measurements of development, which are often fairly minimal and overlook important aspects of a given society (24-25). By taking freedom as the major goal of development, Sen is able to highlight some of these quality of life concerns that may easily be missed by a narrow focus on more easily quantifiable variables such as wealth. He first sets out a wide variety of the intrinsic freedoms that development should attempt to provide. These include traditional rights to political participation and economic exchange, as well as the right not to suffer malnourishment, famine, and extreme poverty (20-30). This discussion of freedoms is not particularly radical on its own, since we may often conceive of freedom in similar
terms. At the same time however, it represents a break with traditional understandings of development economics, and his focus on the right to a certain level of healthcare reflects a particular concern about freedom arising from his work in that subject (21-24).

Sen defends this evaluative role of freedom in development by considering several alternative perspectives for how we may evaluate the success of development. He notes for instance that while utilitarianism has the advantages of actually examining the results of social policies and focuses on the well-being of people in a given society, he also believes that such an approach ignores distributional and non-utility concerns such as intrinsic rights (60-63). Libertarianism errs in the opposite direction by giving procedural liberty an absolute status that makes consideration of the actual substantive freedoms present or absent in a society impossible (65-67). Rather then focusing on utility or procedural liberty for evaluative purposes, Sen believes that those aforementioned substantive freedoms or capabilities should serve as the primary goal in development. For such purposes, he notes that we may consider either a person’s individual achievements or the extent of alternatives he may have (74-76). Sen believes such a focus on capabilities can incorporate the insights from the other approaches to evaluation by taking into account both the outcomes and processes they may act upon and those they have the potential to seek (85-86).

In addition to serving as the primary end of development, Sen also sees freedom as the principle means as well. This may seem extremely counterintuitive, if not completely circular at first. How can freedom simultaneously be both a means and end of development? Sen suggests that in addition to its constitutive role, freedom may also
serve as an instrument for the general promotion of development as well. He writes, “The instrumental role of freedom concerns the way different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general, and thus to promoting development” (37). He outlines five instrumental freedoms that work in conjunction to promote liberty at the individual level and help bring about further development. These are: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security (38). In order to allow for these instrumental freedoms, he recommends a plurality of both public and private institutions that may be able to adequately fulfill these instrumental freedoms and allow them to complement one another (38-41). In measuring and weighting the importance of these different aspects of capability, Sen urges a healthy pluralism and shies away from the possibility of creating a single quality of life index (76-81). He also notes the significance of the democracy insofar as, in addition to providing an intrinsic political freedom and helping establish norms and values, it can also allow for a greater identification and responsiveness in quality of life areas that may be lacking. Thinking about the interplay of Sen’s different instrumental freedoms then, we can see how political freedoms could potentially enhance the social opportunities of a population, at least as long as leaders have the proper incentives and abilities to listen and respond to the expressed needs of the populace (152-159). He does not however formally even begin to outline the various ways the instrumental freedoms relate to one another, and it seems clear that he believes this cycle of freedom is a fairly open process.
The Bridge Building Aspects of the Capabilities Approach

From this brief overview of Sen’s discussion of freedom, it is possible to recognize how he may be seen as synthesizing sharply contrasting positions. This is perhaps most evident in the general aim of his project as a whole. Sen’s work combines the traditionally positive field of development economics with the normative concerns of ethics and political philosophy. His work illustrates the necessary relationship of ethics to any form of welfare economics and how problematic a sharp divide between positive and normative may be. More specifically, Sen reveals how measures of development that stick to the “pure facts” can easily fail to capture the reality of a given society. As Hilary Putnam has noted in a recent essay on Sen’s work, “once one proposes to evaluate economic well-being, one necessarily becomes involved with questions that have been discussed extensively in the literature of ethics. …In short, the serious welfare economists have to have a serious acquaintance with the best of contemporary ethical discussion” (63-64). Putnam goes on to suggest that Sen’s work exemplifies the entanglement of fact and value in the social sciences, a notion which seems to run contrary to divisions that may arise between positive and normative research. The incorporation runs both ways as well, as Sen’s ethical insights are built from his study of empirical development economics and his familiarity with the specific problems developing countries must face. Thus, Sen is first and foremost a bridge-builder between what are traditionally seen as strictly empirical and strictly theoretical fields of study.

Beyond the integration of ethics into welfare economics, Sen’s work also seems to provide a way to avoid the stagnant debates surrounding freedom. The binary he most
explicitly tackles is the apparent conflict between freedom as a means and freedom as an end. As discussed above, Sen sees freedom as being both constitutive and instrumental to development; he obviously does not view this as a necessary contradiction. This dual role of freedom is not so problematic once one becomes familiar with the different specifics of each aspect. Constitutive freedoms are taken as intrinsic and thus are given privileged status as the main goal of development. Instrumental freedoms, such as economic facilities or social opportunities, are seen less as the ultimate end of development, but can instead help foster the expansion of substantive freedoms, both through their own institution and through their interaction with each other. Thus, an increase in social opportunities in the form of improved access to education can help stimulate a country’s economic growth. This in turn may improve a country’s economic facilities which can result in an expanded ability to engage in economic exchange. The interactions and complementarity of these instrumental freedoms can ultimately produce greater substantive freedom. At a fundamental level then, Sen suggests that we do not have to simply pick one side in determining how to justify freedom. We may instead be able to break freedom down into different aspects and roles, with some forms serving as means and others as ends.

Sen also tackles the process-outcome contrast as well. Though this may not be as immediately problematic to a discussion of freedom, the distinction between process and outcome can produce an irresolvable conflict of metrics. Here too, Sen suggests we do not have to choose one at the expense of the other. His capabilities approach to evaluation allows him to simultaneously incorporate concerns about the procedural
liberties and freedom of choice with the actual conditions and achievements experienced in one’s life. This is in large part due to the fact that rather than simply giving either process or outcome absolute desirability over the other, the capabilities approach incorporates both a realized functionings vector and a capability set of alternatives (Sen 75). The former captures the actual achievements and decisions an individual has made, while the latter takes into account the full set of opportunities she potentially could have pursued. There may still be cases where we are unsure which of the two we should use or how they should be weighed against each other. While there are no easy answers to this question, Sen at the very least provides a coherent way of taking both aspects into account under the umbrella of substantive freedoms.

Sen discusses the positive-negative binary the least explicitly of the three. Since he suggests freedom is best understood as capabilities, he may initially appear to have simply sided with the positive component of this contrast and moved on. I would suggest however that this is not the case, as Sen still seems to take freedom from interference fairly seriously. His particular concern about economic exchange, political rights, and civil liberties being among the most important ends of development suggests that he is not immediately hostile to issues associated with negative liberty. Additionally, Sen defends such liberties on the grounds that they are important regardless of the broader effect on the economy (15-17). At the same time however, Sen’s finds it equally important that citizens are able to avoid unfreedoms such as starvation or extreme poverty. Is he simply just picking and choosing when to support a particular positive liberty and when to support a negative one? I do not entirely buy this charge simply
because he is concerned about areas that may not have a great deal of either type of freedom. In such cases, it seems problematic to become obsessed with one at the expense of the other, and though this may result in some tough decisions about whose freedoms to weigh, Sen’s discussion at the very least serves as a useful reminder that we may still attempt to balance the demands of each aspect.

I would thus hold that through both his general approach to the study of development economics and his considerations of these problematic aspects of freedom that Amartya Sen can be seen as a bridge-builder across discipline and seemingly incommensurable perspectives. His work exemplifies the usefulness of continued engagement across different paradigms.

**Objections and Criticisms of Sen**

Sen should however be seen as the final word on any of these topics. As with any work as sweeping and ambitious as *Development as Freedom*, there are holes that can be found. Furthermore, though Sen may have offered one way around some of the obstacles that can plague discussions of freedom, he should not be seen as settling all of the debates. Indeed, there is at least one problematic binary in addition to those discussed so far that Sen clearly does not attempt to engage. In this final section, I will review some possible criticisms of Sen’s approach and briefly discuss this final divide. This should by no means be taken as a nullification of the previous section, but instead as an indication that it’s extremely difficult for a single person to resolve a debate once and for all, especially at the level of theorizing in which Sen is writing.
Brief Criticisms

One problematic part of Sen’s analysis lies in his failure to explicate how the different instrumental freedoms may interact. He gives several examples in the book and I offered my own illustration above, but Sen does not seem to offer a clear picture of the complementarity he emphasizes. This can also create problems for his attempt to treat freedom as a means and end, as without a sufficient illustration of the virtuous cycle instrumental freedoms may produce, it can be difficult to capture the relationship they have with the constitutive kind. Without a clear picture of this relationship, one may be inclined to simply focus on adding instrumental freedoms to a society without actually evaluating developmental success with the presence or absence of constitutive freedoms. This is approach is not entirely problematic, but it would undermine Sen’s efforts to emphasize both freedom as both a means and an end; with this approach, instrumental freedoms would instead be used to fulfill some other set of criteria. As a result, Sen may not have successfully bridged these separate justifications of freedom.

A second potential problem of Sen’s argument is whether it is too inclusive. This point relates back primarily to his evaluative argument; Sen suggests the capabilities approach manages to capture the concerns of disparate schools such as libertarianism and utilitarianism at the same time. Yet in encompassing both an individual’s own achievements and the alternative choices she faced, I am inclined to wonder whether the capabilities approach may be too unwieldy for any actual application. If this is taken to be the case, then an extremely uncharitable reading of Sen would conclude simply that he has incorporated everything and explained nothing. Rather than transforming a debate
about evaluative criteria, Sen would be seen as simply unsuccessfully trying to get the best of both worlds.

_Freedom as Non-Sovereignty_

One final possible criticism of Sen I would like to touch on lies in perhaps a fourth dichotomy of freedom. Both the positive and negative views of freedom seemed at least partially rooted in some notion of sovereignty. An alternative view identifies freedom instead with nonsovereignty. This perspective, advocated by authors such as Hannah Arendt and Linda Zerilli, suggests that the very notion of freedom as sovereignty is problematic, as it would seem to entail avoidance of the public sphere altogether. Zerilli writes, “Nonsovereignty is the condition of democratic politics, the condition of a transformation of an I-will into an I-can and thus freedom” (19). Freedom in this sense exists as the acting and pursuing of interests in a common world not defined by formal rules or legal institutions. Inherent in this view of freedom is a strong distaste for the expediency of modern politics, as action becomes justified only to the extent that it is towards some previously arranged end. This dislike of expediency and this view of freedom as nonsovereignty would thus appear to be in direct conflict with Sen’s own capability approach to the subject, which recognizes the instrumental value of freedom. As a result, it is difficult to see how he helps us deal with this particular binary.

_Closing Thoughts_

As the brief discussion above indicates, Sen is not above criticism. Even if one does disagree with his substantive points however, the capabilities approach offers a new avenue and perspective on certain debates that could otherwise immediately draw to a
close. His co-edited *Quality of Life* is a testament to this fact, as the book collects numerous essays from other scholars influenced by the capabilities approach. Some use it as a springboard for their own methods of welfare evaluations, while others discuss it within the context of philosophy of science. Though Sen is not the first person to tackle these aspects of freedom the capabilities approach nevertheless exemplifies the benefits of the two pluralisms. Sen’s engagement with multiple disciplines and his continued examination of debates that may initially seem reduced to incommensurable alternatives have allowed him to make a lasting contribution to our understanding of both development and ethics.
3. Avner Greif on Institutions

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Amartya Sen may be seen as bridge-builder insofar as his work on development economics reached across traditionally disconnected disciplines and offered a new perspective on potentially stagnant debates surrounding freedom. The reader may accept both of these points but still wonder whether such boundary crossing can similarly occur in more positive strains of social science research. First, are we that likely to encounter problematic binaries like the ones surrounding the concept of freedom when we are primarily interested in the empirical world? If not, then perhaps such bridge-building is simply unnecessary. A second, unrelated argument might suggest instead that the specialization of disciplines in fact makes bridge-building even more difficult. Incommensurability in this case would be a given due to the strongly divergent paradigms found in various social sciences.

I would respond to these charges by arguing that bridge-building is in fact possible in empirical social sciences. As I discussed in the opening chapter, the specific terms social scientists use in positive studies are rarely completely value-neutral. The choice of a particular measure or conceptualization, though perhaps represented as completely neutral, still may invite a great deal of dispute. This point was further driven home by Sen, who was not interested in freedom as a strictly abstract concept but instead wished to use it as an alternative metric for the evaluation of development.

As for the second charge, I hope to illustrate in this chapter how, despite paradigmatic differences across fields, incommensurability is not completely inevitable. To do this, I focus on Avner Greif’s studies of institutions. I argue that Greif’s work
successfully incorporates insights on institutions from economics, sociology, and political science to arrive at a more robust definition and approach to studying them. The competing schools of historical and rational choice institutionalism may appear to have little in common with one another, but Greif manages to integrate insights from each in his work on medieval trade. Though as with Sen, he has by no means managed to offer a complete guide for understanding institutions, I would suggest that Greif has reshaped (if not helped initiate) a conversation among conflicting schools of thought.

In the next section, I will detail some different characteristics of each variant of institutionalism, paying particular attention to areas of contradiction. I then discuss how Greif manages to bring together insights from these various schools in his definition of institutions. Beyond this, I also examine his prescribed way of studying institutions, especially how he attempts to utilize both deductive and inductive methods in a complementary manner. As in the previous chapter, I also consider some criticisms and drawbacks of Greif’s approach. I conclude this chapter with some remarks about the bridge-building of both Sen and Greif.

**Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism**

The recent focus in several disciplines on institutions as a source of explanation for social outcomes would seem to reinforce the claim that specialization makes incommensurability inevitable. After all, though the two institutionalisms share a common name, they have widely varying understandings of what institutions are, how they operate, and how we should go about studying them. While there are perhaps some differences in the dependent variables writers in each school wish to explain, this cannot
overcome that we have a difficult time even arriving at a consensus definition of what functions institutions actually perform. This fact alone would seem to preclude the possibility of any interaction or significant overlap among these different approaches. In this section, I will review some of the fundamental characteristics of each institutionalism, using Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor’s “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” as well as some of prominent works from the two schools I consider. Despite its title, Hall and Taylor’s essay is as much about differences across social science disciplines as it is about those found in political science alone. After reviewing some of these characteristics, I will further lay out the potential problems for dialogue among the schools.

**Historical Institutionalism**

Hall and Taylor first consider historical institutionalism. This school is most prominent within political science and emphasizes how the institutional context in which social, political, and economic interactions take place can help us understand observed behavior and policies. Hall, who is often associated with the school, has previously defined institutions as “the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy” (19). Hall and Taylor believe there are four distinctive characteristics of this variant of institutionalism: a broad understanding of how institutions may influence behavior, a consideration of how institutions may create or affect power relationships, a substantive focus on path dependence and the role of time in institutional development,
and a concern with understanding how institutions relate to other types of social explanation (7).

The first of these characteristics is perhaps most important for understanding both the impact institutions may have on individuals and how we should study them. Hall and Taylor note that historical institutionalists consider both how institutions influence the way actors pursue their interests by laying down certain rules and determining the level of information available and how they may help shape the very interests those actors may have (7-8). As a result, actors are said to be embedded within a particular institutional context. Historical institutionalism then simultaneously encompasses both “calculus” and “cultural” understandings of how institutions may affect behavior (7). Authors may choose to see institutions only as affecting the pursuit of certain preferences, helping determine what those interests are, or both. This fact, combined with the fourth characteristic makes it difficult to explicate a single historical institutionalist methodological approach. Hall and Taylor characterize this as an eclecticism found within the school (8-9).

Beyond the embeddedness of individuals within institutions, historical institutionalists have two other distinct concerns about the role of institutions in society. First, institutionalists recognize how power may influence both the particular shape institutions may take in their creation and how asymmetries may be reproduced in an institutional context (9). A second concern is how time interacts with institutions. This type of analysis suggests institutions may become entrenched or have a lasting impact on the type of policy options available at a given point in time. The notion of increasing
returns may help explain why institutions can remain in place and stable even when more efficient alternatives emerge (9-10). These time and power variables are not given as much attention in rational choice institutionalism, as the next section will suggest.

*Rational Choice Institutionalism*

The second institutionalism has its origins in economics. More specifically, rational-choice institutionalists use economic ideas about strategic behavior, preference maximization, and transaction costs. Douglass C. North has provided a succinct description of how institutions are understood in this perspective: “Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (3). Though North and others consider informal rules and norms, the primary focus is on those regulations which have a direct bearing on strategic interaction. A separate definition rational choice institutionalists may use treats institutions as game-theoretic equilibria. This definition suggests institution are equilibrium outcomes in broader social game (Greif 18-19). Hall and Taylor outline four major characteristics of the rational choice approach as well: the assumption of fixed preferences and instrumental maximization of those preferences based on strategic interaction; the use of collective action problems in the framing of politics; the role of strategic interaction in determining outcomes; and the idea that institutions are created and survive based on their abilities to provide value to the relevant actors (12-13).

The role of strategic interaction is particularly important to rational choice institutionalism. Institutions are seen as structuring the interactions among agents by setting the payoff structure and reducing uncertainty through information and
enforcement. This means that they primarily serve to influence the strategies actors may utilize in pursuing their goals. Institutions may determine which strategies are and are not usable, but they do not have any bearing on the preferences of the actors themselves (12-13).

This characteristic, combined with the notion that institutions’ continued existence is based on their efficiency to provide value to preference-maximizing agents, helps explain the methodological approach of this school. As the name implies, rational choice institutionalists use tools such as game theory to map the payout structure and predicted actions of agents under a given institutional structure. This allows rational choice institutionalists to capture what they see as the microfoundations underpinning broader societal processes; both the creation and survival of institutions can be understood through the value they ultimately provide to those affected by them.

The Two Institutionalisms in Comparison

It may not seem immediately evident how the historical and rational choice institutionalisms are really in conflict with one another. Indeed, at least one subset of the former has the same calculus concerns as the latter. Furthermore, the definitions of the two schools do not seem to be off by a great deal; North’s rules of the game do not sound radically dissimilar to Hall’s standard operating procedures. This would hardly seem to gel with the incommensurability claims I made above.

I would suggest however that the divergences between the two are sharper than they initially may appear. First, there is the issue of how agents may act in a particular institutional context. One of the cornerstones of the rational choice approach is the idea
of actors attempting to maximize their self-interest. Historical institutionalism by contrast does not utilize similar models of rational agents. Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo suggest instead that historical institutionalists tend to see actors as not always looking for the most optimal solution, choosing instead to act in a satisficing manner within a rule-bound context (7-8). This difference may not seem very significant but I would suggest that it may help explain other divergences between the schools. For example, in considering institutional origins, those in the historical camp will pay particular attention to the role of power asymmetries. Rational choice institutionalists, by contrast, tend to see institutions as being created through voluntary agreement by strategic actors. Differing perspectives on human nature can therefore be driving differing accounts of institutional origins.

A second major difference between the two schools lies in how they see the relationship between institutions and preferences. Hall and Taylor, as mentioned above, suggest that one can use calculus or culture approaches to study institutions. Historical institutionalists will use both, but rational choice institutionalists will often focus solely on the calculus end. In other words, historical institutionalists believe that preferences themselves can be endogenous to the institutional context in which they are expressed; this is markedly different from rational choice institutionalists, who tend to treat preferences as exogenously formed.

Similarly divergent explanations are produced from the two schools for the persistence of institutions. Historical institutionalists will more often emphasize the role of path dependency and increasing returns for the continued existence of a given
institution. Rational choice institutionalists, using either of the definitions offered above, will instead be more likely to offer a functionalist account for that same phenomenon; a given institution continues to persist due to the lack of more efficient alternatives.¹⁸

Institutional change will often be framed in contrasting ways as well. Historical institutionalists pay a great deal of attention to unintended consequences and may be able to theorize how institutions endogenously change. Rational choice institutionalists will usually only be able to explain institutional change by reference to exogenous shifts. This is because treating institutions as rules or equilibria does not seem to offer an available route for understanding how change would occur, especially when preferences themselves are also treated as exogenous.

These differences further manifest themselves in the area of methodology. Due to their relatively straightforward assumptions and precise theories about how institutions affect behavior, rational choice institutionalists can more easily systematically model predicted behavior in a given context. Game theory and other deductive methods are particularly important to this practice. Historical institutionalism, by contrast, does not have an overarching approach to the study of institutions. This flexibility in methods may potentially complement the flexibility in theorizing found in the school, but it may also be a drawback. Hall and Taylor note that the causal relationship between a given institution and a dependent variable is not always entirely clear in historical institutionalist analyses; in such cases, the lack of a definite theory of how institutions affect behavior actually does more harm than good (Hall and Taylor 17). This means that

¹⁸ Though some, like Douglass C. North also discuss the role of path dependence and short-run decisions in bringing about long term trends. See North 83-104
even when historical institutionalists are simply attempting to focus on the calculus aspects of institutions, they may lack the analytic toolkit their rational choice counterparts have.

As a result, despite an apparent common substantive interest, the historical and rational choice institutionalisms do not appear readily congruent. Stark differences in how institutions are defined and are seen as influencing human behavior and the methodological approaches appropriate for studying them would seem to undermine the chances of complementarity.

**Avner Greif as Bridge-Builder**

In this section I present a brief overview of Avner Greif’s approach to analyzing institutions focusing on how he defines institutions and the methodology he recommends for their study. Greif’s work on this subject is quite extensive and nuanced and the description presented should not be taken as complete summary of his contributions in this area. I focus on some of the broader aspects of his work, specifically looking for areas where the two institutionalisms seem to have fundamental differences. It is important to note that Greif did not simply build his theory and method of institutions in a vacuum, but instead developed it during his studies on the rise of medieval trade.9 For the purposes of succinctness, I do not delve into his particular historical analysis.

**What Are Institutions and How May They Affect Behavior?**

Greif defines an institution as “a system of rules, beliefs, norms, and organizations that together generate a regularity of (social) behavior” (30). This definition moves Greif away from traditional, monolithic understandings of institutions.

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9 Though Edwards and Ogilvie (2008) have recently written a harsh criticism of Greif’s historical analysis.
and allows him to incorporate multiple elements in explaining a given behavior. Institutions are seen as encompassing these three kinds of “man-made, nonphysical social factors” (33). At the same time, Greif takes institutions as being “exogenous to each individual whose behavior they influence” (33-34).

Greif’s systematic definition of institutions allows us to connect formalized structures in society down to the actual behavior we may observe. For example, to understand why people drive on the right side of the road, we may make reference to the law, law enforcement organizations, and internalized and behavioral beliefs. The first provides a common understanding and guide to normative behavior, the second provide the dissemination and enforcement of those rules, and the third encompass the motivation to follow those rules. This definition of institutions then allows us to see the micro processes underpinning rules in a society and how they may interact to produce a behavioral regularity (35-38).

An additional key to this definition is how institutions cannot be entirely separated from the broader society in which they currently exist. Greif is particularly careful to emphasize the way institutions may be shaped by the cultural heritage and historical legacies in a given society while at the same time producing and influencing the norms and beliefs of the present day. The institutions we may have today can in turn affect and constrain the institutional options we have in the future (380-381). This point is particularly important to Greif since it emphasizes the importance of history and contingency in understanding a particular institutional outcome, a fact that will be further driven home in the discussion of methodology below.
Greif’s Theoretical Bridge Building

It may not seem immediately as though Greif has done any significant bridge building from the account above, but I contend that this discussion of institutions does transform the debate between the two schools. One of the key divisions discussed above was the relationship between institutions and preferences. The calculus approach to institutions prominent in the rational choice school tends to see institutions as being voluntarily shaped by agents to pursue their particular goals. The culture approach found in historical institutionalism emphasizes the embeddedness of agents within an institutional context and suggests that their preferences may be at least partially endogenous to that setting. Greif argues that his definition of institutions captures these two potentially problematic concepts by seeing them as both man-made and exogenous to each individual in that context (42).

A second area of sharp disagreement between the historical and rational choice schools was the way actors in turn express their preferences within an institutional framework. Rational choice institutionalists were characterized as favoring a view of actors attempting to strategically maximize their preferences. The historical institutionalists were seen as less favorable towards this view of rationality, favoring alternative perspectives such as agents as satisficers. Greif claims that his definition does not depend on a unified model of human nature. He writes, “What [institutions] reflect—how they come into existence—and what they imply should not be assumed a priori or used deductively to restrict the set of permissible institutions but should be analytically and empirically examined” (44). This question of human nature was perhaps the key
sticking point for the divide between the two institutionalisms, as it seemed to be the main factor behind subsequent differences in understanding institutions’ evolution and the recommended methodology. At its foundation, Greif’s argument suggests that we should not allow the potential precision of a deductive model to preclude us from considering the full range of empirical evidence. Greif’s bridge-building then allows a researcher to draw on insights from both institutionalisms without having to also accept extensive theoretical commitments about how human nature.

How Should We Study Institutions?

Given the above discussion, it should come as no surprise that Greif’s methodology is particularly attuned to the indeterminacy of institutions. Before outlining his own methodology, Greif discusses some of the problems institutions may pose for traditional modes of social science research. He first notes that deduction alone is an insufficient approach to institutional analysis. First, there is no generalized theory of institutions to use in the generation of hypotheses and inferences. Beyond this however we have little hope of finding one due to the fact that multiple equilibria and thus institutions can be generated even within the most idealized circumstances; this undermines the possibility of any meaningful prediction about the institutional outcome (352-355). Greif finds a narrowly inductive study of institutions equally problematic due to the fact that it does not consider unobservable elements like the norms and beliefs crucial to Greif’s analysis above. Just as we may reach multiple equilibria through a purely deductive method, we may also find multiple institutions displaying similar observable characteristics (355-357).
Having set out some of the problems with using either of these methods to understand institutions, Greif next offers his own empirical method, which he refers to as yielding an interactive, context-specific analysis. The method is applied primarily to individual case studies due to the aforementioned indeterminacy of institutions. In the first stage, contextual information and deductive theory are deployed to find important transactions and issues within a given institutional context. Theoretical knowledge gained from other social science disciplines allows us to see possible causal relationships, while contextual knowledge helps us see where those relationships may be most relevant (357-359). Greif then states that having identified an issue of interest, researchers should proceed to develop a conjecture about how a certain set of institutions brought about a particular social regularity. Next, he suggests that the conjecture be formalized and placed within a context-specific model, wherein the rules are taken to be those technological and institutional factors we have determined as exogenous to the relationship we are trying to uncover (364-365). Greif believes that this context-specific model can then allow us to accept or reject the relevance of a given institution for an observed behavior. Analyzing the game and the presence or absence of an equilibrium can in turn indicate the potential relevance of the institution our conjecture is concerned with; we can also use equilibrium analysis, counterfactual analysis, or comparative statics to use the context-specific model to generate predictions (366-369). In this way then, Greif presents a means of evaluating institutions that simultaneously makes use of inductive and deductive methods.
Greif’s Methodological Bridge-Building

It is somewhat difficult to get a complete grasp of how Greif’s idiosyncratic methodology for conducting institutional analyses can really be considered bridge-building, but I suggest it can be for several reasons. First, perhaps one of the largest tensions between historical and rational choice institutionalists lies in how they study institutions in time. Hall and Taylor note that the vast majority of work in the historical camp has been inductive while most rational choice institutionalists use deductive methods (21). To the extent this is the case then, Greif’s methodology does begin to resemble an attempt to integrate the strengths of each school’s approach. More specifically, one of the issues facing some historical institutionalist studies is the lack of a clearly defined relationship between the institution and dependent variable. Greif’s procedure, with its emphasis on potentially relevant theories in the conjecture-formation stage and his use of game theory to test the relevance of institutions, would seem to offer sturdier footing for establishing that relationship. Similarly, rational choice institutionalists may not necessarily build context-specific models or attempt to fully evaluate the historical environment before the construction of a conjecture. Even if one does not accept Greif’s method, it can still reasonably be seen as attempting to connect two seemingly unrelated ways of conducting institutional research.

Objections to Greif and Closing Thoughts

In this section, I briefly consider some possible objections to Greif’s theoretical and methodological approach to studying institutions. As in the previous chapter, I do not claim that Greif has come up with the absolute best definition of institutions and the
only possible way of conducting institutional research. I also offer some final thoughts on the bridge building aspects of both Greif and Sen.

Brief Criticisms

One criticism of Greif could be aimed at his definition of institutions. Though his systematic understanding seems ideal for bringing together disparate conceptions of the term, it is also possible that it is too unwieldy. More specifically, one could object that Greif has attempted to group too many different ideas under the heading of institutions. This could easily develop into a case of overdetermination, as it may seem as though everything unique to a society is in turn used to explain that society’s particular institutional outcomes. Beyond this issue however is the fact that there may be an issue of ambiguity surrounding the different components of Greif’s definition of institutions. While Greif is not so much interested in forming a single, grand theory of institutions, it can be difficult to deploy this definition in regular research, especially when many writers will be unlikely to have a good deal of experience with the cognitive institutions he identifies. To the extent one accepts these charges, Greif’s bridge-building would not appear to be very stable; specialized schools of thought might be more desirable than unusable combinations.

A second set of concerns relates to Greif’s methodological approach. Here too it may be possible that his efforts at bringing together the two separate schools have resulted in a methodology that is too cumbersome to utilize. This is because the formation of a conjecture and context-specific model may require far more information than the researcher may have access. Additionally, as Greif himself notes, an analytic
model may not be conducive to the testing of a given conjecture. Above all else however, Greif’s use of game theory may still alienate historical institutionalists, as the assumptions behind his models might still be too stringent or unrealistic. Greif devotes an appendix to the question of whether *Homo sociologicus* is strategic, noting that recent work in experimental economics finds evidence for stable preferences, awareness of consequences, and strategic behavior (426-427). Despite these results, not everyone may be convinced that game-theoretic testing of conjectures is the best approach for institutional analyses. It is important to note however that Greif himself does not seem to believe that game theory is *entirely* essential to institutional analysis. He acknowledges at one point that there are a variety of analytic approaches that may be useful for the study of institutions and implies that game theory itself is not entirely essential (53). Despite this qualification, even if one agrees with Greif about his overall definition of institutions, she still might find the methodology off-putting.

*Closing Thoughts*

A critic may be inclined to ask at this point why I was primarily focused on the discipline of political science when I have since written about two economists as my major cases of bridge-building. This is an entirely fair question. I would respond by first noting that my training is in political science and I am to some extent primarily concerned about the absence or presence of pluralism within that field. I would ask my critic however whether she believes Sen and Greif are *only* economists. I should hope that the past two chapters have made it clear that both scholars struggle with issues and ideas located well outside their discipline. Sen engages in debates about how we should
understand freedom and how we should promote democracy with political philosophers and theorists. Greif speaks to economists as well as political scientists and sociologists. All three disciplines have seen at least one variant of the new institutionalisms gain influence and Greif’s approach is as much a repudiation of traditional economic methods as it is an endorsement. 

If it was not already clear from the above, I believe that bridge-building can occur across fields and not just within subfields. I realize it is likely to be a lot more difficult when it is approached in this way, as different disciplines may often be accompanied by different vocabularies. At the same time however, it strikes me as completely sensible not to rely on an isolated model of political man or economic man when trying to explain a real world issue. Specialization may allow for intense study of a single aspect of society, but it can also cause one to lose the forest for the trees. This is perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of Greif’s institutionalism to me, as he explicitly avoids imposing a single function upon all institutions for the sake of analytical ease or elegance.

Thus, despite their lack of political science credentials, Sen and Greif’s works should not simply be disregarded as irrelevant to the discipline. I hope the previous two chapters have helped reveal the value of engagement in the face of incommensurability. While Sen and Greif both have a fair amount of critics, they also have helped influence and shift the form of conversations (and even started some new ones). Rather than seeing separation in the social sciences as inevitable, they both illustrate the benefits of
pluralism and continued engagement outside disciplinary boundaries. In the following chapter, I will take up some of these same concerns within the context of democracy.
4. The Two Pluralisms and Deliberative Democracy

*Action, the only activity that goes on between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition—not only the conditio sine qua non, but the conditio per quam—of all political life.*

Hannah Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition* 7-8

The three preceding chapters have all been focused on theoretical and methodological debates within the social sciences. The two pluralisms discussed in the first chapter were only related to the teaching and study of political science. Similarly, although Sen and Greif focused on issues related to the empirical world, the main thrust of their two chapters was how they helped mediate opposing sides in an academic argument.

In this chapter I attempt to connect the methodological discussion of the previous chapters to issues of democratic theory. More specifically, I consider how our ongoing conversations about social science research may be seen as a concrete example of democratic deliberation. Democratic theory may in turn help foster our understanding of the ongoing methodological discussions in the discipline by helping us think more clearly about issues such as participation and difference.

Before beginning this examination of how methodological debates and democratic theory may go hand in hand, I first outline several criticisms and potential problems for this framing. These objections will serve as a starting point for my subsequent argument for how the methodological and conceptual pluralisms may be related to democratic diversity. Next, I respond to these arguments and justify my

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10 For the remainder of this chapter, I use “methodological discussions” to represent both the theoretical and strictly methodological kinds.
connection between social scientific dialogues and democracy. My concluding argument suggests that both our study of the social world and democracy may be framed as similar projects of inquiry. From this perspective then, the connection between our academic debates and the structure of the political world is not a mere novelty, but instead a perfectly reasonable comparison of fundamentally similar processes.

**Why Discussions of Social Science Research Are Irrelevant to Democracy**

The connection I am proposing between how we think and talk about our studies as social scientists and how we view democracy is not entirely apparent. In this section, I will discuss two criticisms of the very notion of this relationship. More specifically, I discuss how differing goals and structures would seem to preclude the possibility of any fruitful dialogue between these processes.

*Differing Goals at the Individual Level*

The most obvious way our research dialogues as social scientists differ from democratic politics lies in the end goals of each. Our academic discussions are largely aimed at discovering particularly facts and facets of the social world. We may have broad disagreement about which characteristics and features exist, which are important, and how we should actually go about studying them, but there is still a sort of commitment across disciplines to the examination and analysis of the conditions of society. Individual researchers may be said to be primarily concerned with uncovering such features in their work. There is an essentialist element to this characterization, and individuals may instead pursue careers in the social sciences for reasons beyond the desire to study the social world. At the same time however, this goal seems to underpin
the vast majority of social science research; both the most complex statistical analyses and the most descriptive interpretivist case study share a common interest in capturing an aspect of the social world.

In a democratic context, by contrast, the goals of individual participants can be seen as completely wide open. I may attempt to pursue self-interest and my own subsidization through my votes and political actions, while you may be more interested in promoting certain ideals such as justice or freedom. Political actions and expressions may have wildly varying purposes across citizens. One can object and argue that all political actors have some desire to see their political preferences fulfilled. I would disagree with this notion, as it seems somewhat tautological in nature and may not capture other justifications for entering the political arena. For example, I may choose to vote in an election not to help certain issues or politicians gain a majority, but instead simply because doing so makes me feel like a good citizen. This does not indicate a particular political preference underpinning my decision but instead refers to a certain non-political desire behind a democratic act. Even if one does agree that political preferences are the common root behind political action, the content of those preferences is highly contingent in a democratic society. We cannot automatically state that all democratic voters are seeking freedom or equality without any contextual knowledge of the actual society in which they participate. This is highly different from the social sciences, where despite differences in the actual content of their research, an economist from fifty years ago and a political scientists from today can still be seen as concerned
with the uncovering of truth. One can thus conclude that social scientists and democratic citizens differ in the goals behind their respective actions.

Differing Goals at the Structural Level

What about the overarching structure of social science research and democracy? Here also one might insist they are too dissimilar to bother comparing. As individual researchers in the social sciences are interested in uncovering facts about the social world, the institutional structure throughout disciplines may be said to be aimed at this truth-seeking goal. Practices such as peer-review and events like national research conferences help facilitate this goal by bringing together researchers to discuss their findings. These practices help assure the quality of research and reinforce the notion of the social sciences as being primarily concerned with the discovery of facts and characteristics. The attaining of increasingly greater knowledge about how society works could be seen as a broader disciplinary goal.

As for democracy, I would argue that there is still a great degree of openness here as well. Though some theorists believe the goal of democracy is to assure some ideal such as justice or freedom, in its actual operation, it is not necessarily limited to these goals. There is no single teleological end to the practice of democracy. There is also no overt concern with necessarily exploring the truths of the social world beyond the preferences of political actors. Elections could potentially be conveyed as truth-seeking institutions designed at capturing the will of the populace, but the pursuit of truth itself (or any goal) cannot really be captured as the primary objective of the practice of democracy.
Brief Responses

If these characterizations are correct, it would seem highly problematic and nearly absurd to conclude that these two practices could usefully be compared. After all, on the one hand we have a group of people narrowly focused on a single goal with an institutional structure to assist in that process; on the other hand, we have a broader populace with radically differing motivations and goals and with no universal ending point to the process. There seems to be little room for interplay between these two forms due to these fundamental differences.

I believe however that the representations of social science research and democracy outlined above are inaccurate and do not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to relating the two processes in a meaningful way. The characterization of social science research is particularly problematic due to the assumptions made about practitioners and institutions. In the first place, while individual researchers may have a common interest in revealing attributes of a society, it is important to note that this is not always the primary end of that research. Scholars could instead want to use those characteristics as a means to another end, such as emancipation or social justice. Despite the addition of this caveat, the critic could still believe that social scientists are still bound more tightly by a common commitment than the citizens in a democratic context. This may be true, but it is important to recognize that the social sciences are not purely fact-seeking; once this is taken into consideration, researchers do not appear as radically removed from citizens as initially suggested.
More erroneous is the characterization of the structure of the social sciences. The account offered is highly functionalist and treats the social sciences as closed off from the rest of the world. The methodological objections raised by Perestroika and discussed in the first chapter would seem to clash with the notion that institutions in the social sciences serve merely to facilitate the discovery of social attributes. These institutions are still constituted by imperfect humans and as a result should not be taken as purely and consistently aimed at moving forward the overall knowledge about the subject. Additionally, the social sciences are not completely cut off from the rest of society. For example, funding for research and departments is often determined by external organizations which may emphasize certain methodologies or approaches for reasons beyond their ability to provide knowledge. This embeddedness would further undermine the singular focus the above criticism attributed to the social sciences as a whole.

As for the picture of democracy given above, I largely agree with the idea that there is generally a high degree of openness in citizen’s goals and a lack of any predefined structural end point. I would note however that the critic should be careful in how he defines democracy. There are forms and conceptions of democracy that extend beyond the mere aggregation of voters’ preferences. In the section below, I will specifically discuss deliberative democracy, which differs significantly from the single model the critic uses above.

In sum then, I would suggest these early objections to the mere notion of relating the processes of social science research and democracy are not damning to the cause. They rely on a relatively simplistic contrast between the two that makes their differences
seem more fundamental and irreconcilable. I will revisit some of these criticisms and characterizations throughout the rest of the paper, but for now I will tentatively move forward by examining some of the parallels between methodological and democratic discussions and the benefits from seeing each through the other’s lens.

Debating Social Science Research, Debating Democracy

This section finally brings us to an examination of how we may see our methodological discussions as a site of democratic deliberation. After a brief overview of terms, I proceed to argue that our research dialogues may serve as a concrete example of decentered deliberative democracy. I also consider how many own arguments for methodological and conceptual pluralism ultimately parallel the case made by Iris Marion Young for inclusion and recognition of difference in a democratic forum. I refer back to the concerns voiced by the Perestroika movement as well as several other issues raised recently in the social sciences to help make my case.

Deliberative Democracy

Before elaborating on the relationship I wish to examine, it is important to clarify how I will discuss democracy. As I noted in the previous section, there are conceptions of democracy that do not simply refer to the aggregation of voters’ varying preferences through the election of public officials. Though this may be the most common way of thinking about democracy, there are other important processes that we may instead choose to emphasize. I am particularly interested in deliberative democracy. As the name implies, deliberative democracy emphasizes the dialogical elements that may lie behind democratic decision-making. Rather than emphasizing voting, deliberative
democracy instead places public discussion of political issues front and center. Policies are enacted not through a sheer majority of votes alone, but instead based on a cooperative agreement reached through public debate and deliberation.

In *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris Marion Young lists four normative characteristics we may associate with this model of democracy. First, a decision reached through deliberative democracy is legitimate only if those who will be significantly affected by the decision have been fully included in the decision-making process. A second, related characteristic holds that all participants are political equals in that process, with the ability to express their concerns and question others’ positions. Young next suggests deliberative democracy requires a reasonable temperament among all those involved. She suggests this reasonableness refers to the ability to honestly consider alternative opinions and avoid pre-judging the views of those with whom one disagrees. Young’s final normative condition of deliberative democracy is publicity. This means that the interaction in the democratic decision-making context takes place in a public forum wherein individuals attempt to get others to understand their positions (23-25). In the sections below, I will discuss how Young’s normative characteristics may be related to the ideals of the pluralisms from the first chapter in our research conversations.

*The Social Sciences as a Site of Democratic Deliberation*

As might already be clear, the deliberative model of democracy is much more immediately attuned to a comparison with our research discussions. Rather than being mainly associated with the competition for individual votes, deliberative democracy is instead primarily characterized by open discussions about public concerns. Young’s last
two normative characteristics in particular seem to mesh with widely accepted ideas about what constitutes good scientific practice. After all, many researchers strive for a position of objectivity in which they may honestly consider alternative viewpoints before coming to a conclusion on a given issue. Young’s reasonableness would seem to be nearly equivalent to the open-mindedness we may strive for in our research before coming to a given conclusion. Additionally, the condition of publicity may also be reflected in scientific practices. This point is echoed in Robert Merton’s “The Normative Structure of Science.” Merton suggests one characteristic of the idealized scientific ethos is a communism of ideas and findings. He writes, “The substantive findings of science are a product of social collaboration and are assigned to a community” (273). He goes on to note, “Secrecy is the antithesis of this norm; full and open communication its enactment” (274). The public sharing of scientific information allows the dissemination of results and helps researchers hold each other accountable, just as a deliberative forum does in a democratic context.

The mere idea of some overlap between norms however does not automatically mean that our methodological discussions should be seen as sites of deliberation. After all, there may still be dissimilarities in terms of the goals of the participants and the functioning of institutions, as the critic pointed out above. One of the major ways I would counter this argument is by noting how difficult it may be to envision deliberative democracy in action. This is something Young herself concedes; she notes that the aforementioned aggregative model is often taken as the only way democratic politics functions (21-22). I would go so far as to suggest that perhaps that the vast majority of
political issues we discuss in this country today are framed through the aggregative model of politics. One reason for this is the fact that a large portion of political debates relate to topics and policies at the national level. This in turn helps foster the view of politics as being rooted firmly in competition, as it would seem impossible to reach the standards of inclusion needed for the type of deliberative process Young is interested in.

I have experienced this problem firsthand when discussing the deliberative model with others, as it strikes many both as a radically different and completely unrealistic way to conduct politics. This is not to say that no political debates may be conducted in the deliberative style, as local governments and organizations (which may be more accommodating to this style for size reasons alone) still have an important effect on the lives of citizens. Yet even issues such as educational standards, which may have previously been discussed at that level, have increasingly fallen under the scope of the federal government.

There is thus at least a pragmatic reason for considering our methodological discussions as a concrete site of democratic deliberation. At the same time however, an entirely sufficient justification for thinking about democracy in this way still may not have been offered. First, the social sciences’ embeddedness in a broader society would seem to potentially harm the case for using them as a site of deliberation. All the talking and debating in the world might be for naught if external institutional imperatives prevent the existence of any real autonomy in the decision-making process. Additionally, the difficulties of inclusiveness and space constraints that exist at the national level may also reproduce themselves in the social sciences. The range of differences across both
disciplines and subfields and the apparent inflexibility of some of these boundaries would appear to suggest that there is little hope for the type of deliberation discussed by Young. This leads then to a related question regarding the form of deliberation. Should we privilege face-to-face meetings and discussions above all else? If so, this too would seem to undermine the case that the way we communicate about methodology in the social sciences could be taken as a concrete form of deliberative democracy, as many such conversations occur through written articles and other avenues.

A decentered view of deliberative democracy, like the one Young discusses, allows one to address both of these issues. This perspective, which she notes originated with Habermas, suggests that democracy should be seen as positioned within society and not above it (45-46). Young writes, “Society is bigger than politics and outruns political institutions, and thus democratic politics must be thought of as taking place within the context of large and complex social processes the whole of which cannot come into view, let alone under decision-making control” (46). This model of deliberative democracy opens the door for a response to both of the charges above. First, complete oversight is not a precondition for deliberative democracy to have any real meaning. I would maintain that from my experience, social scientists as a collective usually have a fair deal of autonomy in deciding which approaches to use or not use.11 Journals and departments for example may set their own standards for what does or does not count as quality work free of a great deal of directives from outside. Even if you disagree with this point

11 Though cases like the recent splitting of the Notre Dame economics department would indicate this is not always the case. See Donovan (2004)
though, the lack of a completely independent discussion about methodology does not automatically entail a lack of democratic deliberation.

I believe a decentered model of deliberative democracy similarly can respond to the charge that no single, tangible methodological conversation occurs in any of the social sciences. This is because, by recognizing democracy as existing within a complex society, it is possible to move away from the conception of a single meeting in-person as the only acceptable form of deliberation. Young writes, “The norm-guided communicative process of open and public democracy occurs across wide distances and over long times, with diverse social sectors speaking to one another across differences of perspective, as well as space and time” (46). The lack of a single arena for discussion or one ultimate decision does not preclude the existence of deliberative democracy. Under this view, methodological discussions in the social sciences could be seen as part of a deliberative democratic process; though there may not be one big public meeting for the discussion of different approaches to research, the many articles, symposia, and more modest conferences may be seen as parts of an ongoing practice of deliberation. I would go onto suggest that thinking about procedures such as peer review and the organization of events such as academic conferences may help us think about both the format of democratic discussion and the evolution of the rules that govern such conversations. To the extent that they are hostile to certain modes of expression, have they failed to live up to the deliberative ideal? Are they fully inclusive of the views of those who may fall under the umbrella of that particular discipline or subfield? These types of questions help
illustrate how methodological conversations may fruitfully inform and be informed by theories of deliberative democracy.

Using this model of deliberative democracy allows a reinterpretation of the Perestroika movement. Rather than simply being a self-interested attempt to gain journal space or an isolated methodological critique, Mr. Perestroika’s letter can be framed as part of an overarching discussion about what we do as political scientists. The letter’s harsh tone certainly implies that the extent of the discussion in political science has been stifled, but I would argue that the subsequent progress of the movement suggests that at least some deliberation has occurred. Indeed, the letter could be seen as simultaneously supporting and undermining the claim that methodological discussions may serve as a form of deliberation; explicitly, it indicates an absence of conversation, but the momentum and movement it spurred suggests that the process may be occurring on some fronts. Decentered deliberation allows the rules of the conversation themselves to come under review and the Perestroika movement is as much about the democratic forum itself as it is about the “best” way to do political science. In the next section, I will explore the issue of inclusion, which has been a chief concern of both the Perestroika movement and of democratic theorists.

Summing up this section, I believe that the particular methodological discussions we may have as social scientists can be seen as a form of decentered deliberation. The many journal articles and conferences we hold can be seen as examples of such conversation, and the substantive concerns of the Perestroika movement mirror some of
the same issues democratic theorists focus on. In the following section, I consider one of these issues in depth.

*Difference and Inclusion*

The preceding three chapters have all dealt with difference in academic discourse. In the first chapter, I defended both inclusion of and engagement with methodological and conceptual differences in political science. I argued that such openness not only could help expand the analytic toolkit with which a scholar works, but also may allow individual researchers to help transform the state of certain debates, as Sen and Greif did. At a more fundamental level however, I defended the two pluralisms as a way to help foster understanding between disparate viewpoints. I conceded that this would not necessarily lead to the widespread acceptance of a single methodological or conceptual stance, but suggested that the existence of those differences themselves was not entirely problematic. Rather than imposing a single standard for what should or should not count as political science (or any social science) *a priori*, we should instead be open to the existence of alternative methods and theories for their potential value as research tools and as legitimately different ways of seeing the world.

Difference is also one of Iris Marion Young’s major concerns in her work on deliberative democracy. Her chapter “Social Difference as a Political Resource” makes the argument that rather than being something that must necessarily be overcome, difference can in fact be extremely valuable in the process of deliberation. Young believes there is a problematic dichotomy found in certain theories of deliberation relating to unity and difference. More specifically, she writes “[Democratic theorists]
assume that politics must be either a competition among private and conflicting interests, or that political participants must put aside their particular interests and affiliations to form a deliberative public” (7). Instead, she suggests that difference can play a crucial role in the deliberative process. Like Arendt in the quote that began this chapter, Young sees the public as primarily constituted by plurality. There is no universal narrative or perspective to be found in the public but only difference and particularity. Deliberative democracy cannot really hope to undo or transcend all of these differences, nor should it really attempt to do so (111-112). Young uses the Arendtian conceptualization of the public in a democratic forum to argue for a notion of objectivity based on both the expression and recognition of particularity across a differentiated public (112-114). This is preferable to other conceptions of objectivity theorists attempt to impose on the deliberative process, as we are unlikely to completely detach ourselves from our respective particularities. Also, the particularity and context-dependence of the very problems we are interested in solving in a deliberative forum mean that attempting to reach some Archimedean view or formulate a completely generalizable solution is neither necessary nor necessarily helpful (113). One final reason to acknowledge particularity in a democratic context lies in the situated knowledge participants may have. Such localized understandings can help the decision-making process become both more objective and wiser by allowing the inclusion of certain forms of knowledge (114-118). By attempting to instill uniformity and objectivity in the more traditional sense on deliberative forums, we may thus be limiting valuable inputs for our decision-making. Thus rather than requiring all participants to become strictly public citizens, Young’s
model of deliberative democracy recognizes both the unavoidability and benefits of particularity.

My own discussion of the pluralisms in the social sciences and Young’s consideration of difference in a deliberative context seem to run parallel to each other in several important ways. Perhaps the most important way I believe we reflect each other lies in how we frame difference in the social sciences and democracy. It is neither a bug that necessarily has to be overcome, nor something we should use as a justification for isolation from each other. Similarly, there is a resistance to an imposition of uniformity on the particular processes involved in each endeavor. I argued that one of the main reasons for engagement was the fact that it may allow at least greater understanding of our actual differences, even if it did not produce a consensus belief; this perhaps parallels Young’s conception of objectivity, though I did not use the term. Finally, her argument for the deployment of situated knowledge as one of the benefits of recognized difference in a democratic context seems similar to my own views regarding the analytic toolkit social scientists may use. While situated knowledge is more often associated with the particular social position an individual may be in, the benefits Young derives from such inclusion and recognition strike me as similar to the ones I see coming from engagement.

The critic may respond that this is all well and good, but I am simply comparing the role of difference in my idealized conception of the social sciences with Young’s idealized conception of democracy. This does little to actually advance the view of the social sciences as an existing site of deliberation.
While I would agree with the argument that the pluralisms I outlined in the first chapter do not necessarily capture the complete reality of any of the social sciences, I would respond that they do reflect very real concerns. The Perestroika movement in political science is based on a desire for greater inclusion of differing views within certain conversations. Issues such as the criteria behind the selection of journal articles and the awarding of certain prizes explicitly dealt with the problem of particularity and partiality in our research discussions. The education question I discussed at the conclusion of the first chapter also reflects a tangible concern with the role of differences and debates in the classroom. The problematic dichotomies that Sen and Greif were navigating concerned not just substantive questions about freedom and institutions, but also a broader conversation about the reconcilability of certain views and approaches. I would thus suggest that while I did offer a fairly theoretical discussion of some recent controversies in the social sciences, it arose out of concrete problems and debates. Ultimately then, this is not merely a case of an ideal theory looking like another ideal theory, but instead a matter of the methodological concerns which spurred my discussion of the two pluralisms overlapping with the some of the substantive foci of a theory of deliberation.

Reconceptualizing Democracy

Even if I have successfully made the case that our discussions of methodology may serve as an imperfect real world example of democratic deliberation, the critic may still wonder what the point of all of this is. Even if the form and processes behind some of our own disciplinary debates may be a more realistic example of some of the aspects
of democratic theory, can we really say this will help our thinking about the issue? While I did offer a few examples in the above section of how they may fruitfully inform one another, I did not provide an entire account.

A second possible criticism is that I have still perhaps glossed over the goals of social science researchers and participants in deliberative democracy. While I claimed in the first section that they are not necessarily so divergent as to defeat any comparison between methodological discussion and deliberative democracy, they may still severely limit it.

In this final section, I attempt to respond to both of these criticisms by offering a reconceptualization of democracy informed by the preceding discussion of methodology. More specifically, I frame democracy as a project of inquiry. A major component of this view of democracy is the problem of incommensurability discussed at length in the preceding of three chapters. After outlining and defending this notion of democracy, I offer a more substantive response to the meritocratic arguments briefly considered at the end of the first chapter. I then offer several concluding comments.

Democracy as a Project of Inquiry

In the previous three chapters, I have spent a great deal of time focusing on the problem of incommensurability. In the first chapter, I considered how it may cause an instant retreat and end to engagement in our discussions. In the following two chapters, I examined the work of two scholars who chose not to make such a withdrawal when confronted by ostensibly incommensurable paradigms and in the process managed to transform the debates in their fields.
It initially may make little sense to discuss the issue of incommensurability within the practice of democratic politics. This is especially true in forms of aggregative democracies. If you and I are operating under different paradigms of politics, we may argue a great deal or get involved in different activist causes, but it is most likely that we will simply vote for the respective candidates that most closely mirror our own view and interests. We will continue to see the world in radically different ways, but life will go on after Election Day. This is one of the major reasons why Young characterizes the associative model of locating voters primarily, if not solely, within the private sphere (20).

What about Young’s own deliberative model? I would suggest that the discussion of difference above should make it clear that incommensurability may certainly play a role in her model. She elsewhere suggests that she sees democratic deliberation as being in a state of constant struggle, both in the raising of the issues and in the subsequent discussion (50). It would be a mistake to suggest deliberative democracy is a simple process of mentioning problems and talking about how to solve them. Rather, different participants and groups may struggle with one another over both attention to a particular concern and the best way to go about solving it. This characterization of the nature of deliberative democracy thus meshes with her view of the plurality of public life and the need to avoid striving for a non-particular perspective. Though it would be nice to say that the outcome of a deliberative decision-making process is at the very least understanding among all participants, even this may not be counted on. In cases of
extremely stark differences or incommensurability, there may still be winners and losers at the end of the process (108-111).

From this consideration of incommensurability in the deliberative context, I would reframe democracy as a particular project of inquiry. At one of the more basic levels, both associative and deliberative models could be framed this way. The former could be seen as an attempt to both discover and implement the popular will or the preferences of the largest group of voters. The deliberative model may also be framed as a kind of political investigation; Young writes that the model she outlines is aimed at “discovering and validating the most just policies” (17). Although both of these framings may capture an aspect of democracy as a process of exploration and discovery, I part ways from them. I am particularly concerned with democracy as a way of investigating the very incommensurabilities we may have between us as individuals. Young of course emphasizes the examination of differences in a democratic context, but she sees this as a means to a more just end result in the implementation of policy (116-117). Although I think she may be right about the connection between increasingly inclusive deliberation and just outcomes, I fear this comes into tension with her argument about struggle. The pluralistic nature of politics would seem to be accompanied by a great deal of uncertainty; it thus seems problematic to suggest it will necessarily produce justice in outcomes.

By loosening the connection between Young’s model of deliberation and justice, is my view simply collapsing into the aggregative model, which explicitly makes no distinction between the preferences expressed and presence or absence of justice,
freedom or equality (Young 50-51)? I would respond that it does not due to the emphasis on the investigation of incommensurabilities at the level of the democratic participant. Such explorations do not occur within the aggregative model, which all too often results in a vote and withdrawal. My view of democracy instead treats incommensurability between individuals neither as something to be resolved exclusively at the ballot box nor as strictly a means to a just end. Rather the discussion and struggle over our paradigmatic differences is the defining characteristic of the process. Self-reflection on one’s own particular view and social engagement with those of others are the most important aspects within this model. I accept the fact that this type of investigation will not always end successfully in a complete meeting of the minds. Indeed, I agree with Young that we should avoid both the unity ideal and the Archimedean view of justice in our democratic deliberation. I also recognize the fact that the agonistic nature of deliberative politics may even preclude all but the most infinitesimal progress in seeing each other’s positions. Indeed, the only successful aspects of democracy as inquiry may sometimes be the external discovery of certain best policies, as the both the aggregative and Young’s model emphasize. I would not however suggest the amount of changed minds should necessarily be the metric for evaluating this form of democracy. Rather, I believe the four normative characteristics of inclusion, political equality, reasonableness, and publicity can themselves serve as the ultimate yardstick for this model of democracy. These normative ideals can help facilitate our individual examination of the differences and incommensurabilities we may have with one another in a democratic setting. I also do not mean to imply that the democratic decision-making itself would take a back seat to
strictly idle conversation about how different we all are, but instead believe that the existence of such discussions within a decision-making context is an appropriate goal of deliberation. This then would provide for a model of non-teleological, decentered, deliberative democracy with an emphasis on the examination of our own particularities, our differences with others, and the extent to which we may or may not be able to comprehend those differences.

This model of deliberation, inspired by the preceding three chapters, would seem to strengthen the pluralisms I outlined in the first chapter. Rather than having strictly instrumental value as a way to expand the analytical toolkit, ably criticize and attempt to crowd out bad science, or even transform entire methodological and theoretical debates, the engagement I advocated would now appear to be one of the chief goals of the social sciences. By this I mean to the extent that the deliberative democracy I outlined above is seen as a model for the social sciences, the investigation of differing approaches to studying the world becomes equally important as the actually studying of that world. Active attempts to confront and make sense of perceived areas of incommensurability, rather than return to a certain zone of comfort within our disciplinary homes, would be perhaps one of the more important tasks of the social sciences. Here too I do not mean to suggest that all anthropologists should spend one week a year reading about economics or anything like that. Nor do I think it makes a great deal of sense to attempt to create quantitative variables to measure the “reasonableness” of a given field. Rather, at the most fundamental level, this model of democracy serves as a call to attempt to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable or understand the inexplicable. There of course may be a
great deal of uncertainty behind any endeavor to see things from another perspective, but this alone should not result in an immediate retreat into the confines of the likeminded in the social sciences or any other deliberative democratic context.

*Meritocracy Revisited*

This view of deliberation in the social sciences also allows me to respond to some of the lingering arguments in favor of meritocracy that I discussed at the end of the opening chapter. This view suggests that we may in fact measure the value of competing theories and methods in the social sciences and that we should only use those that best explain or predict the phenomena in which we are interested. An advocate of this perspective may argue that rather than engaging with a difficult alternative approach such as postmodernism, we should simply discard it. The benefits of disengagement, such as simplicity and harmonization, would thus be seen as outweighing the advantages of engagement that I outlined in the first chapter.

The above consideration of the social sciences as a democratic pursuit, in addition to a truth-seeking one, now allows me to respond to these arguments in favor of meritocracy. Even if I accept the measurement of merit in the social sciences as completely possible and even if I recognize the potential efficiency advantages under a unified paradigm, the undemocratic impulse behind the meritocracy argument strikes me as extremely problematic. Consensus in this case is not arrived at through continued discussion among social scientists, but instead is seemingly imposed on the entire field based on some notion of merit. This model of the social sciences necessarily closes off certain conversations before they may even be initiated by attempting to define what does
and does not count as a social scientific practice from the top-down. Above and beyond the instrumental problems that may accompany this move, my major concern is that there is little if any attention paid to the actual deliberation and reconciling of incommensurabilities that I view as fundamental to a democratic practice.

In some ways, the meritocratic model could simply end up mirroring the aggregative model of democracy; just as the latter simply arrives as policy by discovering the most widely held preferences through a non-deliberative act of voting, the meritocratic model of the social sciences would likely result in the complete adoption of whichever theories and methods already have the most support. Though this may simplify our understanding of the social sciences, it also may lead to even sharper divisions between both subfields and entire departments. Once a single way of “doing” economics or political science is established, those with marginalized methodologies or concepts will seemingly be left out in the cold. This could even mirror the atomization Young identifies with the aggregative model, in which citizens simply remain in the private realm throughout the democratic process (20). In the social sciences, once this uniform procedure for doing political science is in place for example, I would never necessarily have to interact or even consider the different approaches those in sociology or economics may use (even if we are studying the same subject).

A final parallel between the aggregative and meritocratic models lies in the actual formation of ideas about the world. The aggregative model of democracy takes citizens’ preferences as for what they are, without any consideration of the context in which they were formed (Young 20). The meritocratic model of the social sciences may produce a
similar result after it has been implemented. This is because once there is an established, uniform way of conducting some sort of social inquiry, it may become so ingrained that alternative theories are never considered. Once a future generation has become completely enculturated in this practice of inquiry, it may become nearly impossible to consider or even recognize possible anomalies. The theories and methods of this next generation could be retained not due to any consideration of merit, but instead simply because this is the only form of social science research to which they have become accustomed. This approach then would not even be retained due to its merits, but instead because of its status quo nature; just as the aggregative model fails to recognize the context in which preferences were formed, so too does the meritocratic model fail to completely portray how or why a given theory or method might be retained.

I would thus argue that even if all of the instrumental benefits of a meritocratic model of the social sciences outweigh those of a pluralistic kind, there are still strong democratic reasons to choose the latter. To the extent that the former limits both the scope and participation in academic debates, it seems extremely problematic from a democratic perspective to adopt it across the social sciences. Rather then cutting off ongoing debates, the two pluralisms would allow and encourage continued engagement, despite strong differences in both theory and method. I believe this can help the social sciences progress far more than the imposition of a single approach, but beyond that, our

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12 Kuhn himself discussed at length the priority of paradigms and the influence they have on the understanding of scientific findings (43-51). My concern is that in the rush to establish a paradigm in the social sciences, we may also be completely undermining our ability to recognize the anomalies that will inevitably accompany it, resulting instead in the perpetual reproduction of a single paradigm.
efforts to reconcile these differences gives the pluralistic model a democratic advantage that meritocracy lacks.

_Closing Comments_

The first goal of this thesis was a simple consideration of whether and why we should want a pluralistic science of politics and society. Even if one disagrees with the theoretical work in this chapter connecting that pluralism to ideas about deliberative democracy, I hope that I have at least made the case that there are benefits to continued engagement in debates that seem futile. Such continued engagement may have instrumental value at the individual level, such as the learning of new methods or the generating of new hypotheses. Beyond this however, I have attempted to show how this kind of dialogue may also produce new methods, theories, and areas of overlap between previously incompatible positions and practices. In this final chapter, I have attempted to connect some of these strictly academic debates with an understanding of democracy; the upshot of all of this has been the idea that continued engagement may ultimately also have an inherent value as a fundamental form of democratic participation.
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