Why?*

Kenneth A. Shepsle, Harvard University

Post-war, mid-twentieth century developments in political science, mainly of a methodological flavor, transformed a discipline prone to historical narratives and descriptive tomes into a social science. We learned to count, measure, and generally to identify regularities and give precision to otherwise imprecise observations. But we forgot, for quite a long time, how to ask “Why?” And even in those cases where we did, it was often as an afterthought. The real triumph was the identification of empirical patterns in data, not explanations of them.

“Why?” is the question to which we political scientists should devote more of our intellectual labor. Explanations for empirical regularities, carefully derived from clearly articulated premises, are the gold standard to which we should hold ourselves. Robin Farquharson in his Theory of Voting (Yale, 1969), quoting the mathematician C.A. Coulson, put it thus. He suggested that the use of mathematics in application to a social or physical problem involved three steps: “i) a dive from the world of reality into the world of mathematics; ii) a swim in the world of mathematics; iii) a climb from the world of mathematics back into the world of reality, carrying the prediction in our teeth.” An explanation for him (and for me) is a (set of) sufficient condition(s), better yet necessary and sufficient condition(s), characterizing “how the world works.”

The modeling tradition in political science and political economy has provided an antidote to a thick empirical focus to our research, but it is hardly a fully satisfactory one. Ranging from microeconomics to canonical rational choice theory, game theory, behavioral decision theory and agent-based modeling, there are growing signs of interest in building a skills-set to engage why-questions and provide explanations qua mechanisms to account for empirical regularities. The fact that nearly all Ph.D. political science programs in major research universities offer training in modeling is hopeful. Each new generation of political scientists comes armed with both methodological and theoretical tools their teachers can only envy. If persuasion and conversion are blunt and only partially effective instruments of intellectual change, then it will be generational replacement that is the principal vehicle for moving us along toward answers to why questions. (“Scientific progress occurs one death at a time” as they say.)

The behavioral revolution produced a methodological transformation of political science. In its zeal for precise measurement and the

development of tools with which to analyze the data thus produced, however, it threw some babies out with the bath water. Attention to explanation is one of these.

*****

Kenneth A. Shepsle first met Sidney Verba in the Spring of 1985 as the two stood on the patio of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences gazing at the Stanford campus below, with Sid describing how horrible (in comparison to Harvard) it would be to have to live "down there." Taking Sid's advice (and the Harvard offer), Shepsle is the George Dickson Markham Professor of Government at Harvard.