

A Revisitational Assessment of the Rise of Behavioural Approach in Political Science

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KEYWORDS Post-behavioralism; Ideological imperialism; scienticism; multivariate analysis; micro-politics; intellectual adventurism; behavioralism

ABSTRACT This paper while acknowledging the academic excitement caused by respective intellectual efforts of various scholars in their analytical discussions of the history of political science and, its growth, specifically focused on the behavioural approach. Our analysis shows that the behavioural approach has consistently sought to make political science very quantitative and scientific. And, that, it places emphasis on micro politics (i.e. the study of political actors and processes) - rather than the formal institutions of government. In the process, the paper highlights the history of the approach paying deserved attention to the debate that characterised its growth as well as its features. The paper contends that inspite of various criticisms against the approach, it has had and will continue to have an enduring impact on political science as a discipline that studies the wherewithal of our political existence as political animals.

Historically all social knowledge was one and indivisible...for almost two thousand years from the early classical Greek period to sometime in the eighteenth century men basically saw each other not as specialist but generally as seekers after wisdom and knowledge... But with the increasing weight and differential rate and direction of development of knowledge in the modern historical periods, this general corpus gradually began to break into specialized segments. (Easton, 1965)

We do not have to look further for a starting point than the above statement in analysing some of, or the various metamorphoses which had since.

Without doubt, the history or growth has been that of topsy-turvy or academic excitement caused by the respective intellectual efforts of various scholars either in search of knowledge or jockeying for academic recognition within the academia.

This trend has led to the emergence of various developments or approaches within the field. In other words, the discipline of political science in the course of its growth has been exposed to, or, has witnessed evolutionary additions in the number and sophistication of approaches to its study and what it studies itself.

Some of these approaches have brought about changes in the oriental rigorous empirical – study of politics through quantitative and scientific

emphases on micro-politics, and parting of ways with some metaphysical and normative concepts to which the discipline has been traditionally accustomed.

One of these approaches is the behavioural approach (or revolution) a revisitational assessment of the rise of which is the concern of this paper. The analysis assessment of this approach which seemed to have permeated all the anatomical fibres of the discipline of political science can be usefully made against certain pertinent questions: What actually is behavioral approach about? Is it a form of intellectual revolution aided by the intellectual or ideological imperialism of its exponents within the realm of political science? OR is it a form of renaissance of though necessitated by the intellectual adventurism of respective social (or political) scientists within the academia? If it is none of the above, what then is it?

None of these questions can be answered without possible mystification unless a brief elucidation of the background of this notion is provided.

To begin with, behavioural approach is undoubtedly one of the hotly debated issues within the realm of political science and other Social Sciences. It has long constituted the core of an intellectual dialogue between political scientists. Few political Scientists (if any) can discuss the process of their intellectual odyssey

in isolation from this debate or dialogue which is traceable to pre-world war II epoch. Though, the actual dialogue or debate between exponents and opponents of behaviouralism is a post-World War II phenomenon. This is because the period immediately following World War II marks the emergence of the creed of behaviouralism.

This creed started the dialogue. The reason for this is clear because those who were not known to be part of this school of thought were neither prepared nor ready to be dormant when a "radical" re-organization of thought was about to take place within the field of their calling-political science. It was this unwillingness to succumb to what some have called "Ideological Imperialism" that created and contemporaneous political scientists about behaviouralism.

Behaviouralism which has been defined as a mood of methodological rebellion against the older philosophy of traditional political science² came as challenge to the field of political science.

The rise of behaviouralism which is indicative of this challenge would be briefly explained before actually analysing what behavioral approach is and what it has done or has been seeking to do to political science.

Even though, it can be logically deduced from the foregoing discussion that behavioral approach or behaviouralism is a creature of the quantitatively oriented political scientists who were opposed to or dissatisfied with the tenets of traditional political scientists due to their emphases on the prescriptive nature of political science and, lack of adherence to scientism, many factors have been identified as equally responsible for the rise of this scientific orientation within the field of political science.

Robert Dahl, a reputable political scientist has noted six inter-related factors which influenced the rise of the behavioural movement. One was the evolution of the university of Chicago's Department political Science under the leadership of Charles Meriam (Meriam, 1926). who in 1925 before the American political Science Association called for "a Science of Political behaviour... or a science of social behaviour (Ibid). Which will do for political science what science has done for the hard core sciences.

The second factor cited by Dahl was the influx of the European Scholars into the U.S. These scholars whose backgrounds were in the hard-core science came to the U.S and occupied the chairs in most of the political science departments

in American universities. As a result of their background these scholars encouraged the use "of sociological and even psychological theories for the understanding of politics" (Dahl, 1961).

Another factor was World War II. Dahl explained that the outbreak of the war forced many American political scientists to deal with day to day reality of social life and also reveal to them for the first time the "inadequacies of the conventional approaches of political science for describing reality much less for predicting in any given situation what is likely to happen" (Ibid).

The fourth factor was the creation of the Social Science research committee and the subsequent creation of an adjunct committee on political behavior. The evolution of this special committee helped shift the entire focus of the discipline to the behavior of individuals as the empirical unit of analysis (Ibid). The fifth factor Dahl pointed out was the development of the "survey" method as a tool in the study of politics. Other factors included the influence of the philanthropic foundations and the nature of the American polity and culture. As a result of the wealth the philanthropic foundations controlled and the dominant position they occupied in the American educational structure they were able to encourage through the educational institutions and independent scholars researches that were geared toward the behavioral methodology (Ibid). The American polity and culture influenced the growth of behaviouralism because of the nature of political economic institutions, its arrangements, and the nature of the American political experiences. For what has been referred to as the specific nature of the American Political experience, see for example Dwight Waldo, "*Political Science Tradition, Discipline, Profession, Science, Enterprise*, in Vol. 1 of Greenstein and Polsby (eds.) *Handbook of Political Science*, Pp. 1-30. See especially the section on the Development of American Political Science". All the above factors combined created a political culture that was committed to what Dahl referred to as "pragmatism, factmindedness, confidence in science etc. (Ibid).

In addition to the above factors, Truman has noted two other factors: the change in the character of world politics after postdam, the breakup of the colonial systems. And the subsequent emergence of the new nations. Both factors which required a new and a broad approach to the study of political institutions (Truman, 1973).

At the beginning of the 50s when the above factors were coming to fruition and the behavioral approach has also began to establish a stronghold in the discipline of political science, David Truman and David Easton unleashed their attack on the traditional approach to political inquiry.

Some of the concerns expressed by Truman (Truman, 1965) and shared by Easton (Easton, *op cit*) was that the pragmatism, factmindedness, historicism and the commitment to scientism of the prebehavioural era was without any concern for the political systems, a total neglect of theory and of its role in understanding political behavior, a parochial approach to the study of political institutions and the lack of comparative and interdisciplinary approach, unnecessary commitment to empiricism without theoretical empiricism, etc. (Truman, *op cit*) From these causal factors of the rise of behavioural movement, it is apparent that the behaviouralists were aware of the intellectual and research advances of other social sciences like sociology and psychology, (Hayes and Hedlund, 1970) and the need for political science to avoid lagging behind. It is equally apparent that the behaviouralists at that time discovered that the skills of the political scientists were not highly valued by governmental personnel officers due to the lack of scientific emphases within the core of political science (Ibid). Not only this, the behaviouralists wanted and still want concern for methodology and research orientation to be a hall-mark of political science hence their dissatisfaction with the traditionalists' opinions about issues like individual participation and political system in general.

These explain why the behavioural school has consistently sought to make political science very quantitative and scientific and, why they have place emphasis on micro politics (i.e. study of political actors and process) – rather than the formal institutions of government" (Leeds, 1980).

These efforts by the behaviouralists in our view constitute nothing but desire for improvement and scientific rejuvenation of political science. This is attested to by the Creed of behaviouralism" or, the key behaviouralists articles of faith" (Sommit and Tanenhaus, *op cit*). According to the behavioural creed or articles of faith, capability of scientific prediction and explanation is not beyond the scope of political science if political scientists engage in search of political behaviours and their accompanying variables. And that observable

phenomena should be the only concern of political science as opposed to institutionalism.

This creed equally subscribed to the fact that political science should be more interdisciplinary and that political scientists should be familiar with research tools like sample surveys, mathematical models, multivariate analysis and so on (Ibid). Generally, the birth of the behavioural approach has consistently led to the genesis of scientific research into variables like political attitudes, role perception, voting behaviours, pressure groups, roles of leaders and elites, individual and group behaviour and their interaction within the system." (Leeds, *op cit*)

In short, the rise of this approach within the discipline of political science has brought with it sophisticated concepts and scientifically sophisticated tools of analysis and evaluation like "tables, graphs, scales, charts statistical and mathematical models" (Ibid).

With these, behaviouralism or behavioral approach (to us) was and still is a new thinking about the methodological approach in political science. It has propelled the discipline into a new direction of intellectual inquiry or pursuit of knowledge by charting a new intellectual channel with a capacity to grapple with political phenomena of our time. In other words, it has made political science more attuned to the changing needs of people within the polity

It should be stated at this juncture that behaviouralism or behavioural approach has never been without intellectual or ideological opposition. Such opposition is the anti-behaviouralists condemnation of the merit of quantification which the behaviouralists claimed as very important to political science in term of research. The anti-behaviouralists have asserted that this is not attainable and that political science must not deviate from historical concern for moral and ethical issues even though they cannot be scientifically resolved. And that if this deviation should occurred, there will be no need for the existence of political science (Sommit and Tanenhaus, *op cit*).

The "opponent of behaviouralism also claimed that too much adherence to the idea of interdisciplinary approach will undermine the identity of political science. Not only this, "obsession" of the behaviouralists with methodological approach has also been condemned by the opponents of behavioralism. They have argued that this obsession has caused a sort of

goal displacement as far as inquiry into political phenomena is concerned. They said this obsession has generated a tendency to pay more attention to techniques at the expense of contents (Ibid).

The identification of the creed of behavioralism and the analysis of the views of its opponents clearly put into focus the state of the dialogue which began since behaviouralism gained a wider currency among some political scientists following world war II.

With the continuation of the debate between contemporary followers in this discipline, we would be cautious in identifying behaviouralism as a revolution (*per se*) instead we would be contented with it being a form of intellectual movement the impact of which in our view holds a challenge which cannot be avoided by either contemporary or future political scientists.

Neither do we subscribe to the idea of behaviouralism being a form of ideological imperialism in as much as the creed of behavioralism is not mandatory imposed and in as much as it does not deny its opponents the right of dissent, its typification as a form of ideological imperialism would be nothing but ridiculous.

Because of its impact political science (though this is debatable) we would argue that behaviouralism is a form of renaissance (if not in totality) of certain parts of political science. The debatability of behaviouralism's impact on political science is exemplified by the views of (even) some of the behaviouralist themselves. For example while accepting the idea that behaviouralism has had pronounced impact on political science. Robert Dahl was also cautious by referring to the scantness of such impact (Dahl, *op cit*). But, on the other hand, Heinz Eulau seems to be firm about the impact of behaviouralism on political science:

"the behavioural penetration of political science has had the effect of vitalizing and improving the older forms of writing and research.. It has had a salutary influence on the quality of all political science" (Eulau, 1973).

The fact that behaviouralism since its emergence has been incorporated into the discipline of political science instead of disappearing

reinforces its indelible impact on political science. Its mere continuation is an incentive to the pursuit of knowledge. Behaviouralism or behavioural approach is the antithesis of traditional political philosophy. Its emphasis on scientific methods and empiricism as opposed to traditional political philosophy justified this assertion.

Whether the synthesis is about to emerge or has emerged in the form of post behaviouralism is a different topic not covered by the scope of the present paper. But we should state however, that despite its impact on political science behaviouralism has suffered a sort of erosion of wide recognition and acceptability in terms of criticism levied against it. But then, it has survived to date due to the evolutionary pattern of human society and its accompanying complexities which necessitate a corresponding sophistication in the knowledge of intellectuals whose expertise are needed to meet the challenges of these complexities.

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