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Methodological Notes on the Study of Political Culture[1]

Paul Nesbitt-Larking[1]

Defining political cultures as those discursive practices associated with the power-related facets of evolving human relations and social movements, the paper presents some methodological principles, inspired by the structurationist approach, to overcome existing impasses in political culture research. In general, it is argued that empirical research in political culture must integrate theoretical, ethical, and practical concerns. More specifically, the case is made for greater depth in the treatment of the individual and consciousness in the process of cultural production, for an extension of empirical investigations beyond the legal-institutional aspects of politics, for a more thorough exploration of the relationship between social scientific and lay understandings, and for a more sophisticated treatment of time and space in political cultural analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The making of methodologies involves more than just the routine and innocent application of technique to concept. Each stage in the design and practice of research is inherently compromised by theoretical and ethical challenges.

Most studies in political culture have exhibited insufficient engagement with these methodological complexities. The result has been an impoverished series of accounts, unable to convey the practices of real men and women as they make sense together of their power-related experiences. In a great many empirical analyses, methodology has been little more than an unselfconscious technique for converting the 'partial truths' (Clifford, 1986, p. 6) of the researcher into 'instruments.' Even the best of these instruments has tended to assign people to

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positions rather than to stimulate dialogue between the researcher and the subjects.

However, I do not wish to focus much of my attention upon critique. [Useful critiques are available throughout, *inter alia,* (Almond & Verba (Eds.) (1980); Gibbins (Ed.) (1989); Pateman, (1971, 1980); Welch, (1987)]. Instead I wish to address the legitimate question: 'So, what would you put in its place?'

A wide range of developments in contemporary social theories and research practices have stimulated me to build a new agenda for research in the field of political culture. (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1987; Bourdieu, 1987; Held & Thompson (Eds.), 1989; Luxton, 1980; Oakley, 1986; Henriques *et al.,* 1984). Rather than elaborating upon these insights explicitly, I will concentrate my attention upon certain key problems in the building of a new methodology. My analysis will be theoretical and ethical, but also practical.

I stress the word "practical." The highly sophisticated nature of successive waves of critique in cultural studies threatens to disempower us as empirical researchers. I wish to remain connected to the phenomenal world. Consequently, despite some misgivings, I respond to the inspiring exhortations of Wright Mills:

> Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. (1980, p. 224)

Reflective of my concern to sustain an openness to the experience of others, I have decided to flag each of the problems I discuss with spatial metaphors: depth, latitude, reach, and longitude.

Before I get into the substance of these problems, I will sketch a brief introductory delineation of my reading of the concept "political culture." Raymond Williams (1976, p. 76) described culture as one of the two or three most difficult words in the English language. He did not mention the other one or two, but I would nominate "politics" as a good candidate. The definitional murkiness surrounding both concepts perhaps works to my advantage. I shall, however, resist the temptation to declare imperiously that the words mean whatever I *say* they mean. More seriously, I shall operate on the assumption that *my* ability to define politics and culture is, to a great extent, dependent upon the success of my dialogues with those who are living in cultures and making politics.

Since I must start somewhere, I shall tackle "politics" first. I take a broad view of politics, seeing in it multifaceted practices of power. Power emerges in relational networks as agents engage in the practices of making decisions (some of them binding) and allocating resources. No political agent is ever entirely powerful or powerless. If one party has no power, then the other party has no need of it. Power certainly connotes oppression and coercion, but it also suggests to me resistance and/or compliance. Furthermore, relationships of power must be seen as *enabling* as well as *constraining*. Each agent in political relationships, no matter how asymmetrical, controls the realm of possibility and desirability, even as they bear the apparently solid constraints of necessity.

"Culture" is a social achievement in which people create and transmit meaning. It is constantly being reproduced, modified and subverted wherever and whenever people encounter each others' experiences and voices. In making cultures, agents routinely draw upon existing symbolic resources such as words, texts, actions, gestures and artifacts. Paraphrasing Giddens (1984, p. 191) one could say that cultures are both the medium and the outcome of recursive practices. In other words, cultures are, simultaneously, the sedimented and widespread stocks of symbolic resources as well as the manner in which people draw upon these resources in their cultural activity. This insight enables us to address the familiar and undialectical dualism which characterizes much of the research in political culture, the artificial distinction between micrological and macrological levels of analysis. Any given micrological cultural practice, such as a dyadic exchange, resonates with cultural material drawn from a complex, macrological series of sedimented practices of meaning. Consequently, at the micrological level while people definitely make cultures, they do not do so under circumstances entirely of their own choosing (Marx, 1972, p. 10. Originally, 1852). Thus it is possible to capture, in the same practical moment, filaments of culture from the global to the idiosyncratic. In a very practical sense, any analysis of culture should attempt to identify and classify these filaments according to the extent of their embededness in time and space.

Cultural and political practices are so intimately related that it is often difficult in practice to distinguish between them. As Lipietz notes, ". . . much of politics is conflict over the naming of social relations" (1988, p. 15). How we conceptualize and label the world conditions not merely "who gets what," but more fundamentally, "who gets to define what is worth getting." This is the point at which ideologies enter cultures (Giddens, 1983; Laclau, 1983). Ideologies are programmatic and partial appropriations from cultures, originating in the relatively organised interests of groups. Political cultures are looser, more general and, relative to ideologies, less interested and invested ways of seeing. Thus political cultures often develop quite practically and incoherently, even if they can also be struggled over and rendered more coherent.

To summarize: Political cultures happen as people, operating in an already existing symbolic field of cultural concepts and practices, convey to each other conceptions of the distribution and uses of valued resources and the making of decisions and rules.

I now turn my attention to the four problems identified earlier.

DEPTH

My strategy for exploring people's experiences of power is both "etic"—that is, involving externalized and social scientific conceptualization—and "emic"—concerning the internalized interpretation of lay actors. The emic facet

of the research agenda takes us right to those places where cultures are lived and made.

Since interpretation is, in the end, a psychic rather than a social act, we must inevitably wrestle with the relevance of the individual in cultural production. However, we should avoid erecting artificial barriers between the individual and the social group. Rather than regarding the individual as, on the one hand, the historically fixed and sovereign source of culture or, on the other hand, as an oversocialized and determined cluster of role expectations, we do better to regard the individual as the conditioned yet contingent outcome of complex layers of discursive and material practices. Consequently, one task in political culture research is to explore the precise interweaving of conditions and contingencies in what individuals practice together and say to each other.

Testimony to the centrality of this task is evident in the consistent inability of social researchers to explain why, despite their carefully conceived explanations of social relations, real human agents do not always follow in the anticipated fashion. As Reich long ago argued, what needs explaining is not why the hungry steal, but why they *do not* steal (Reich, 1970, p. 19.).

Despite its insights, there is a problem with Reich's argument: the implicit tendency to treat collectivities as pre-given subjects. Any reference to a group as a subjective agent should be made cautiously. The most we should argue is that, from time to time, people who come to membership of such groups, as well as other pertinent agents in social systems, recognize them as effective agencies and act accordingly. The *extent* to which groups come to be recognized is an empirical question which can only be addressed insofar as relevant cultures are investigated. We cannot, for instance, assume that groups known as "social classes" exist and then ask people about their class membership. People may not think about "class" very much or they may operate with understandings of stratification and differentiation which are unknown to the researcher—even if that researcher is well-informed about theories of "false consciousness." This problem will become acute if sufficient numbers of people operate with conceptions which create systematic patterns of response, but only do so for reasons about which the researcher remains ignorant. One critical element in overcoming this problem is the depth analysis of how individuals make sense together.

It might be objected that the individual is no more a given transhistorical subject than the group. I would not entirely agree. It is true that historical conceptions of individuality have changed and that current Western understandings of the autonomous individual are products of the modern era. However, irrespective of its substance, consciousness is an omnipresent and irreducibly individual phenomenon just as culture, despite its variable content, is a ubiquitous and necessarily collective phenomenon. Consciousness is that reflexive mode of self-awareness the locus of which is the individual. Cultures are made and re-made through practices of individual consciousness.

However, cultures are mediated through individuals in other ways. Much of the work individuals perform with cultural material is implicit, covert, or even silent. Individuals are often unable to account for the ways in which they routinely draw upon cultural material, and they are not always able to control the effects of their cultural initiatives, both deliberate and routine. Consequently, research in political culture is obliged to attend to the routine and common sense aspects of cultural work as much as to the discursive and conscious elements. This requires researchers to develop a familiarity with the sedimented rules of cultural *languages* as well as the often obscure practices of cultural *speech*.

One indispensable element in the exploration of how intersubjective cultures emerge is, therefore, the appreciation of particular subjectivities. This entails research with particular individuals because individuals are the sites of consciousness as well as less reflective forms of awareness.

In the North American context, a promising site for the investigation of a small number of individuals who regularly perform cultural work together is the household. [See Barnard (1969, p. 393) and Cohen (1975, p. 163).] The household is itself an important site of political culture, and it is likely to serve as a springboard and a sounding board for other contexts. Oriented but not limited to the household, the researcher, from an etic standpoint, must analyse what individuals do and say in a range of contexts. Each individual in a household will also operate in a number of other social settings, such as the workplace, the school, and the social club. The researcher should be present with the individuals in these other settings in order to appreciate the entire repertoire of symbolic practices. From an emic position, a progression of dialogues must be established in which the interpretations of the researcher, principal actors, and others are constantly triangulated. The researcher can offer lay actors certain material and insights, but should, while being a good teacher, remain an exemplary student.

What benefits accrue to those who agree to be research subjects? None can be guaranteed. At best, the analysis of power relations and conceptions of power in small group situations encourages all participants to reflect and to learn. Moreover, participants become beneficiaries of what is sadly a rare treasure, the concern of the genuinely interested listener.

Research of this kind can empower or even disempower certain participants. I am acutely aware of the potency of simply raising the partiality and contingency of ways of seeing and ways of doing politics. Such potency carries with it a heavy responsibility on the part of the researcher. The ideal of the disinterested and detached observer in such an obtrusive setting is unattainable. As a consequence of in-depth research, some individuals might develop a new-found assertiveness, while others might find their hitherto taken-for-granted coercive rights in certain spheres beginning to crumble. The difficulties surrounding these potentialities deserve more analysis than I can give them here.

I will, however, briefly comment upon one aspect of these problems, the

issue of researcher neutrality. We are not neutral and we should not pretend to be. While retaining a genuine receptiveness, we should convey to our research subjects as clearly and honestly as possible our interpretations of their ideas and practices. We should also attend to their interpretations of us. Under certain circumstances we might offer advice and judgment, but we should never tell people what to believe or what to do. Oakley (1986) discovered that real people do, in fact, ask questions and solicit opinions. A muted or deflectionary strategy on the part of the researcher is unrealistic and, under certain circumstances, can give rise to a situation in which important information is withheld to the detriment of the subject. I acknowledge that the line between advice and instruction is, in practice, blurred and often difficult to sustain. However, the alternative strategy of distanced and spurious neutrality is likely to lead to arid research findings and will maldistribute toward the career academic any "benefits" from the research.

LATITUDE

Since political culture is ubiquitous, a useful research agenda will be open to a broad range of power-related symbols and objects. While the large-scale legal and institutional focuses of the past retain their importance, the net must be cast much wider to include households, workplaces, schools, and sites of recreation. It is highly probable, as Pateman (1980, pp. 85, 86) argued, that people's experiences of power form continuities across experiential sites. It is, moreover, useful to explore discontinuities in different settings.

As I have mentioned, a plausible research strategy might begin in the household, working with three or four individuals. One suitable technique for assessing the complex interplays of the experiences and symbolisations of power of the various participants across their daily sites is to travel with them, observing how they adjust to these various networks of interactions. It will be important to compare and contrast the ways in which the key actors perform their political cultural work—what accounts, schema, knowledges, affects, opinions, myths and ideologies they draw upon and how they utilise these strands in their discursive practices. Patzelt (1990) is developing a thorough symbolic framework for the classification and analysis of political conversations. Using Patzelt's taxonomy, a detailed profile of each individual can be established to serve as the basis for articulating statements about cultural practices in the range of micrological settings pertinent to the actors.

Consistent with my general approach, these techniques would implicate the researcher in semi-participant observation, neither completely involved, nor completely detached. The problem of reactivity cannot be entirely overcome, but it will be lessened to the extent that the various sites are already somewhat

familiar to the researcher. To achieve this end, the researcher could conduct preliminary reconnaisance of a range of maximally-similar sites prior to entrance to the actual sites with the research subjects.

Subsequent stages of the research project, which I discuss in the next section, take the analysis to more general and abstracted modes of cultural manifestation. They should be rooted in, but not hemmed in by, the preliminary findings of the micrological research.

REACH

Students of culture face the perennial hermeneutic problem of how to reconcile expert and lay understandings. The problem might be easier if we could claim for the researcher a monopoly on discursive or scientific reason, while allowing lay actors only practical or common-sense reason. In practice, however, distinctions are not so clear-cut. Under the best of circumstances, the most that can be said is that the researcher is often able to bring certain systematic insights to the exploration of culture which are not immediately available to lay actors.

This probabilistic situation requires us to steer a course between the Scylla of researcher-based arrogance and the Charybdis of subject-based naiveté. We are obliged to acknowledge the creative cultural knowledge of lay actors while recognizing those patterns of cultural conditioning which are likely to move situated cultural actors in certain ways even when they are not themselves aware of such conditions. One obvious precondition is the diligence of the researcher in coming to grips with a range of contextualizing commentary pertaining to the lives of those subjects under study. This immerses the researcher in a detailed and far-reaching exploration of already existing research findings concerning the economic, political, and social circumstances of those particular individuals whose cultural lives are being explored in detail.

Armed with this knowledge, the researcher can at least ask some of the right questions, even if she or he must also anticipate some "wrong" (i.e., unanticipated) answers. Thus a proper understanding requires more than background knowledge; it depends upon communicative exchange. I envisage a recursive four-way dialogue. Most obviously, the discursive reasoning of the researcher must encounter the practical reasoning of the actor. However, the lay actor is not completely lacking in discursive reasoning, and, of course, the researcher's discourse is itself conditioned by taken-for-granted assumptions. Much of the success in unearthing the nature of the political cultural work going on depends upon the successful maintenance of open and equal communication. Whenever this process entails disagreement or discord about facts or values, the researcher must exhibit the thicker skin and must bear much of the strain of reaching out to negotiate the process back to mutual understanding, if not agreement. To this

end, some form of pre-selection of both researchers and research subjects as well
as the establishment of terms and conditions of the research "contract" become
critical.

One of the most powerful spinoffs of establishing a working rapport with a
small number of individuals, which includes an empathetic appreciation of how
they experience and symbolize power, is that these individuals constitute an
excellent source for testing the validity of those research schedules and instru-
ment necessary for broader research in political culture. I envisage an iterative
research process which takes as its raw material the observed practices of politi-
cal culture in a small number of settings in a single community. This knowledge
should guide the substantive agenda for the next round of research—a larger
number of interviews, perhaps a few dozen, with others in the community. On
the basis of the ethnographic work and the findings of the interviews, it is then
possible to devise questionnaires for mass administration. At each stage, it is
important to sustain the collaborative nature of the exchange between researcher
and researched. (Verba, 1980, p. 398).

LONGITUDE

Political scientists have established boundaries for political cultures, usually
those given by nation-states, and then proceeded to explore patterns of cognition
and affect within these containers. I favor *exploring* patterns of cognition and
affect so that we might discover what boundaries exist for cultural actors. The
task is rendered complex because political cultures are multifaceted, and there is
no guarantee that the various spatial symbolizations overlap neatly.

If we could draft dependable maps of political cultures, in which typical
patterns of cultural expressivity were given spatial limits, we might claim to have
"captured" expressivity in some way. But this would be a Pyrrhic victory, for
cultures are in temporal as well as spatial flux. Moreover, time and space are not
given frameworks in which to explain culture. They are created and recreated
through cultural practices. We can assume very little. The legal boundaries of
nation-states are torn down and yesterday's obedient subjects are today's de-
manding participants.

Given the slipperiness of these manifold boundaries, how do we ever come
to make statements of a *general* kind about patterns of political culture?

One answer is inherent in the emic side of my approach. At the very least
we should listen to those people who create and reproduce boundaries through
their purposive actions. Furthermore, we must continue to return to them, and
others like them, in a cyclical strategy combining the styles of in-depth and mass
research I have described so far. Political culture is best read longitudinally.

But we should not, and do not have to, rely upon these lay informants alone.

As we gather increasing stocks of data on existing cultural patterns, it becomes easier to interpret what is happening and what is likely to happen. Some of these data come from careful empirical research with cultural actors, and some derive from material employing other quite conventional strategies of research.

For instance, a broad range of social theory and data exist to illuminate the coexistent forces of globalization and localization in contemporary cultural practices—that paradoxical blend of explosion and implosion. One could borrow from the broad theoretical tradition of Innis (1971) and McLuhan (1966), asking plausible and grounded questions about the contemporary relevance of regimes, states, and national political communities in the world of contemporary mass communications. One of their most stimulating hypotheses is that in their bureaucratic-militaristic control of huge expanses of space, large empires inevitably fail to appreciate the transhistorical obdurateness of integrated local cultures. Put epigrammatically, "space" conquers "time," but "time" erodes and slowly cracks "space." But before predicting the demise of states or the eruption of new nationalisms, we should, of course, be sure to listen to the voices of those actually making the history.

CONCLUSION: A NEW METHODOLOGY?

Social scientists will be familiar with most of the proposed methodology I have discussed in the paper. Taken in isolation, these elements are not new. Contextualized searches of literature and data, in-depth interviews, semi-participant observations, carefully crafted questionnaires, triangulations of accounts, and longitudinal studies are all familiar.

So what is new? I make four claims for the novelty of my approach.

First, I believe that the ethnographic side of research in political culture remains underdeveloped. (Laitin, 1988). I hope to have incorporated into my proposals ethnographic ideas which will enrich the experience of being there as cultures are lived and made.

Second, I hope to have taken my analysis a stage beyond the announcement of the cessation of hostilities between quantitative and qualitative social science. I have devised a set of proposals which will allow both for the intimate analysis of how cultures are experienced and created and for the more distanced empirical assessment of the distribution of these cultures. I have outlined a cyclical and cumulative process which incorporates extensive and personal work with a few individuals, detailed dialogues with a few dozen, and impersonal, yet germane, questioning of hundreds and thousands.

Third, I have deliberately invested into my proposals some serious consideration of challenging ethical issues. Believing that neutrality and detachment are both intellectually unproductive and difficult to sustain in practice, I have at-

tempted to create the groundwork for open, honest, and egalitarian research practices.

Finally, my entire approach is driven by the profound theoretical advancements of structuration theory (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1987). Anthony Giddens has set himself the theoretical task of replacing the undialectical *dualisms* of existing social theory with the breathing *dualities* of structuration theory. I have attempted to apply Giddens's insights practically in the development of a viable methodology for the study of political culture: (i) Rather than arguing from the academic position of political scientist, sociologist, or social psychologist, I have made my case as a free intellectual concerned to discover how power is experienced and symbolized and what difference this makes to the social fabric. (ii) I have avoided the extremes of synchrony and diachrony, arguing that cultures are always emergent but not thereby completely unpatterned in time and space. Equally, (iii) my approach has been both micrological and macrological and I reject the barriers which have been erected between these levels of analysis. The broadest elements of global culture resonate in the private acts and sayings of individuals, and it is only by attending to these particulars that we can begin to appreciate the vicissitudes of general cultural manifestations. (iv) Rather than arguing the case for individual-level or group analysis, I have developed a curiosity about how subjectivity and agency are mediated through discursive and practical consciousness and cultures. Both the individual and the group are complex and malleable products of discursive practices rather than parametric pre-givens. (v) There are no pregiven structural boundaries to culture. Cultures can certainly be interpreted in ways which are beyond the immediate comprehension of large numbers of lay actors but, as I have attempted to explain, the ultimate morphology of any culture depends upon the practices of those who both deliberately and routinely draw upon its characteristics. (vi) Finally, I have attempted to displace both the researcher and the researched, favoring a collaborative and cooperative research process. Discursive reason is the avowed goal of the researcher, and most lay actors perform their cultural acts in a routine and unself-conscious manner most of the time. However, such a rigid division of labor is by no means a given or something deserving of our automatic encouragement. As researchers, we have fallen victim to our often myopic "common sense" in the past. We have also failed to acknowledge the theoretical insights of those we purport to understand.

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