

Traditionalism vs. Behaviouralism: the Great Polemic

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1. Introduction

From cradle to death human beings exist within the political system both domestic and international. A system which Robert Dahl (1984:10), defines as “any pertinent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, control, influence, power or authority”. Like in many other fields of study, there are contending paradigms for the understanding of international relations. However, of the contending approaches to the comprehension of these pervasive phenomena, traditionalism and behaviouralism have both captured the attention of a substantial number of students of political science generally. The basic thrust of this chapter is to explicate these approaches along with the expose of their methodological weaknesses. This chapter therefore has three major rubrics. The chapter begins with an indepth analysis of traditional/classicist approach to the study of international relations its tenets, pros and cons. The second major part extensively explicates political behaviouralism, also exposing its methodological weaknesses too. For the most part, this section of the chapter is restricted to the 1950s in which the behavioural approach had its greatest impact on political science generally. The chapter concludes with the argument that for contemporary political science and its sub-division - international relations - to be relevant no single methodology can say it all rather they need to complement each other.

2. Traditionalism:

One of the oldest methods of analysing politics is the traditional approach. Mainly, it deals with the study of political institutions like the electoral systems, legislative bodies, executives, courts, political parties bureaucracies and interest groups. Institutional comparison involves a relatively detailed description of the institutions under analysis followed by an attempt to clarify which details are similar or different.

In many comparisons at the institutional level, one must take various characteristics into consideration such as: (a) the genesis of the institution; (b) the purpose of its creation (c) the process of growth of the institution (d) the means by which the institution is perpetuated (e) the manner in which new members are brought into the institution (f) the external and internal structures of the institution (g) the relationship of the general community (h) the spheres of life in which the institution operates (i) the functions of the institution and (j) the importance of the institution in the total and social configurations of the polity being examined (Eckstein, 1963).

Like in broad study of politics, traditional or classicist approach takes descriptive or historical forms in international relations study. It is also the approach of those who concentrate on 'power politics'. The primary focus of the traditionalist is on the particularly unique aspects of inter-state relations. International relations scholars with a bent for this approach focus more on international organizations and certain features of the international system such as the defunct Organization of African Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU) the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the Arab Israeli Conflict Non-alignment, the Warsaw Pact, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), etc and goes further to describe each of them either as a whole entity or in parts (see, Adeniran, 1983:17-18).

Protagonists of this approach has however found a number of merits in the paradigm that: (i) its focus on power and security politics accounts for much of the activity that takes place in the international arena, (ii) it

gives a reason why such activity need occur i.e self-preservation; (iii) it points up the still important actors in international relations i.e states; (iv) it is also good for its realization that power is a psychological relationship to others.

3. Significant Weaknesses

In broad study of politics generally, traditionalism has several other weaknesses. The salient ones are discussed in this section. To start-with, in the traditional approach, emphasis was placed on Europe for its generalizations and assumptions which make it to be inadequate because what obtains in Europe should not and can not be made a rigid pattern for occurrences in other parts of the World. This is a serious shortcoming of the approach. Thus, it is configurative being unable to explain why a system outside Europe operates the way it does. The approach has also been criticized for being too legalistic. It regards the constitution as being the most important document that defines power - who has power, the relationship between one government and another with the organs of government. Therefore, constitution becomes the focus of attention. In essence, the approach assumes that constitution is all what we need to know about politics. Whereas, religion, economy, pressure groups and personality traits of major actors in the polity among others have their impacts and bearings on politics. The approach ignores the informal aspect of politics. For instance, using traditional approach to analyse the prospects of the new initiative in African politics - African Union (AU) - the basic concern of such scholars will definitely be the character of the nascent body - whereas, the personality traits of heads of government from time to time as regards their commitment to the body will equally go a long way to determining the success or failure of the body.

Furthermore, traditional approach is weighed down by what scholars called parochialism - there was a typical western bias in the selection of relevant countries to be studied, e.g., the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the United States and the defunct Soviet Union - and in the relevant variables to be employed for description. The traditional

approach has been criticized too for being empirically weak. Models or theory were non-existent in traditional comparative politics, at least at the level of intention and recognition. Concepts were often employed with little methodological discussion as to their definition and measurement. Finally, traditional approach was more of case studies than comparative. Most of the texts in the field of comparative government either studies one single country or engaged in parallel descriptions of few countries (Lane and Ersson, 1994:2). Back to international relations, and specifically foreign policy, if not Aluko's work – The Foreign Policies of African States (1977), there are few works studying countries on comparative basis except introductory texts that concentrate on western nations.

Irreverent critiques of the approach argues that (i) it cannot be the sole explanation for international activity today; (ii) it leaves one of her important actors, and (iii) more importantly, it is unable to account for the co-operative behaviour among states that we see on the inter-state level (Adeniran, 1983:18) rather than the mere power relationship focus.

4. Developments that Led to the New Science of Politics

During the period of decolonisation, countries gained independence and asserted their own personality of statehood. Therefore, scholars that wanted to study these new states had to understand them and this is one of the reasons that led to the demise of traditional approach to the study of politics. With decolonisation, Western scholars discovered that some of their major concepts were inappropriate or inapplicable in other parts of the world most especially non-European societies like Africa. European scholars of the institutional era placed much emphasis on the formal organs of government and the constitution. But these institutions were conspicuously absent in Africa during the spell of decolonisation. In view of this, African societies were considered to be stateless. The reason is that the intricacies of the workings of the pre-colonial African societies became fascinating to the European political sociologists like M. Fortes and E.E. Evans Pritchard (1950).

In the same vein, happenings in Europe glaringly demonstrated the insufficiency of the traditional approach to the study of politics. The assumption of Western liberal democracy fell like pack of cards when fascism emerged and was championed by Hitler. It would be recalled that before Hitler came to power, German Republic had Weimer constitution, which was generally regarded as the most democratic in the entire Europe. The question is, if the constitution was really and in fact the most democratic anybody could get, how come did it prepare the ground for fascism? This was how the formal/legal approach became defeated, and they began to see the limitations of this approach, for if it was inadequate for them definitely it should for others.

Be that as it is, before the Second World War, United States of American (U.S.A), had adopted the policy of 'isolationism', but with the war, she became involved and broke out of her cells, then American scholars began studying beyond their society, thus, broadening their horizon. Not long, they realized the shortcomings of their methodology too. After the War, the empirical range of the field of political science had been greatly enlarged primarily through the intense study of non-western systems and research into other parts of politics, previously neglected.

5. Background to Political Behaviouralism

Political behaviouralism an empirically oriented discipline developed as a protest movement to traditionalism, which had become excessively ideological and scientifically meaningless in the eye of behaviouralists. This crusade - to use Claude Ake's term - (1982:20) seeks to "convert the study of politics into a more rigorously scientific discipline modeled after the methodology of the natural sciences". The main thrust of the behavioural movement occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Major contributions during this period appeared in the areas of voting behaviour, political participation, and the understanding of psychological characteristics of human beings. An apparent manifestation of this era involved the restoration of unity within

the social sciences, as political science developed affection for theories, methods and orientations of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and Economics (Charles Worth, 1967:3).

Another characteristics of this time was the fierce battle between traditionalists and behaviourists. Opposition to the new science of politics came from classicists whose approach to theorising was based on philosophy and history, the study of institutions and the explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgement (Otaney, 1992:1). Most students of politics, even those unwilling to accept classification as behaviouralist, would probably agree about the general nature of its assumptions and objectives, although strong differences might well arise concerning the precise emphasis to be given to any one of these. What is the nature of these assumptions and objectives, the intellectual foundation stones in which this movement has been constructed? No single way of characterising them is satisfactory to everyone, but the following list provides a tolerably accurate and reasonably exhaustive account of them (Easton, 1967:16):

1. Regularities: There are discoverable uniformities in political behaviour. These can be expressed in generalizations of theories with explanatory and predictive value,
2. Verification: The validity of such generalizations must be testable, in principle, by reference to relevant behaviour.
3. Techniques: Means for acquiring and interpreting data cannot be taken for granted. They are problematic and need to be examined self-consciously, refined, and validated so that rigorous means can be found for observing, recording, and analyzing behaviour.
4. Quantification: precision in the recording of data and the statement of findings requires measurement and quantification, not for their own sake,

but only where possible, relevant, and meaningful in the light of other objectives.

5. Values: Ethical evaluation and empirical explanation involve two different kinds of propositions that, for the sake of clarity, should be kept analytically distinct. However, a student of political behaviour is not prohibited from asserting propositions of either kind separately or in combination as long as he does not mistake one for the other
6. Systematization: Research ought to be systematic; that is to say, theory and research are to be seen as closely intertwined parts of a coherent and orderly body of knowledge. Research untutored by theory may prove trivial, and theory unsupported by data, futile.
7. Pure science: The application of knowledge is as much a part of the scientific enterprise as theoretical understanding and explanation of political behaviour logically precede and produce the basis for efforts to utilize political knowledge in the solution of urgent practical problems of society.
8. Integration: Because the social sciences deal with the whole human situation, political research can ignore the findings of other disciplines only at the peril of weakening the validity and undermining the generality of its own results. Recognition of this interrelationship will help to bring political science back to its status of earlier centuries and return it to the main fold of the social sciences.

It needs be emphasized that this rigorous scientific approach to the study of politics was spear-headed in international relations by Roseman, Deutsch, Kaplan and others (Adeniran, 1983). They have as their goals, the development of a scientific theory that could be used to explain every aspect of international relations. The approach rejects the premise on which the traditionalist approach is based on the ground that it does not provide

adequate theoretical interpretation of international relations. Through, the new scientific approach, theories are formulated to explain relationships between variables and predict the future largely on the basis of repetitious events (Ibid).

6. Weaknesses of the New Science of Politics

There has developed a powerful critique of behaviouralist assumptions and findings. One set of criticism's related to fundamental or philosophical objections against the behaviouralist approach, its methods, assumptions and techniques. The first of the behavioural approach is the assumption of value-neutrality. This involves the distinction between facts and values, which are necessary. According to behaviouralist there is need to disassociate subjective phenomena from objective information for the sake of scientific clarity. This value-fact dichotomy is best comprehended within the realm of philosophy. Virtually everybody possesses experiences, value and motives, which influence their understanding of others. Objectivity - the ability to free oneself from personal prejudice, - in interpreting human behaviour is believed to be impossible for investigators, consciously or unconsciously, that they are influenced by their values and are inclined to attach a personalized significance to observables. Political behaviouralists overlook this natural intrusion of values. An understanding of human political phenomena without acknowledging these intervening factors lead to an inchoate and illusionary body of knowledge. Claude Ake reinforces the existence of the weakness of value neutrality thus:

We cannot fully understand politics by looking only at manifest political behaviour. It is necessary to look at the underlying propensities, attitudes, values, and beliefs, which define the context in which the political act takes places. (Ake, 1982).

Attempts at separating value statement and factual information are tantamount to dividing politics and philosophy - disciplines which have been assumed to be highly interrelated since the times of Aristototeleian Political Science (Schaar and Wolin, 1969:148). Behaviouralists with their

value-free orientation often distinguish between scientific political theory, which states conditions and political philosophy, which justifies preferences, (Shaar and Wolin, 1969). Students of the new science of politics turn their backs to political philosophy because philosophy involves a strict reliance on judgment and values. Behaviouralists acknowledge philosophy as an important area of investigation with fundamental foundations and structures for interpreting standards of evolution, but its subjective character and moral grounding, coupled with its apparent inability to create new theories are conceived to be impediments to achieving a generalised verifiable understanding of political matters (Dahl, 1984:122).

A significant drawback of value-neutrality and consequently a break with philosophy of irrelevances. The value-fact dichotomy or dualism in behavioralist research is untenable. The very selection of subjects for investigation is shaped by values, which are by no means scientific but reflect the researchers' personal or ideological biases and judgements. In other words, the behavioural researcher is himself guided in his work by a set of value-judgement and assumptions, which determine his research priorities, and strategies and which cannot be isolated or analysed in scientific or behavioural terms. For instance, the whole upbringing of political scientists in the world political scene is built on the values and beliefs including the prejudices and sentiments existing in the political system of which they are a part. Therefore, the research of scholars of behaviouralism reflects commonly held principles. A good example of the carry over effect of values is such that when examining work on "democracy" of American, Russian, Asian or African scholars respectively, it would be easy to discern from the substance of the four works the various valuational foundations and political orientations. A manifestation of the weakness of inherited biases is the tendency of behaviouralists to promote principles of liberal democracy. It is true that most adherents of the behavioural approach are Americans. It is not surprising therefore, that the

new science of politics is “parochial and bears the imprint of Western mass-democratic assumptions” (Shaar and Wolin, 1969:130).

A related weakness too is the conservative nature of behaviouralism. This is exhibited when looking at the pre-occupation of behaviouralists with description and analysis of facts. The tendency of behaviouralists to function in an unprogressive manner has had the effect of distancing themselves from critical issues of political science. The ideology of conservatism divers scholars of the behavioural persuasion to taking a course of “intellectual Puritanism” that keeps them as remote from the substance of politics as the “inmates of a victorian nunnery were from the study of sex” (Hedley, 1966:366). Critiques of behaviouralism has not forgotten to raise the question whether an empirical science which can only study what ‘is’ and not what ‘will’ be much less what ‘ought’ to be must not inherently be conservative. They argue that underlining the behaviouralist assertion for “ought” questions is a belief that what ought to be already is and that the traditional rule for the intellectuals as a social critique is no longer possible. In other words, in focusing on pure science they have ignored issues of what ‘ought’ to be. But Christian Bay (1965) has argued that the study of politics is essentially normative and that the purpose of politics is to meet human needs and facilitates human developments. Bay, contends that politics exists for the purpose of progressive obstacles to human freedom and development with priority for those individuals who are the most severely oppressed and who are also the least likely to achieve redress by way of the ordinary political process. Indeed, Bay, argues that the best hope for a more politically useful research is for political scientists to concentrate on how best to achieve the satisfaction of basic needs and wants of man.

Another problem with the behavioural approach is its alignment with the natural sciences. Observation, quantification, formulation of hypotheses, and verification with measurement are some of the methodologies used in the natural sciences (Campbell, 1952). Scholars of the new science of politics have attributed the success of the natural sciences

to the use of their methodological tools. Behaviouralists have appeared to believe that they could themselves aspire to the level of “science”. But identification with the natural sciences is troubling for behaviouralism in the area of mathematical applications.

A major impact of behaviouralism is the adoption of new mathematical tools. This is often accompanied by minimal mathematical sophistication and rarely by any political sophistication. Besides having problems related to the application of mathematical tools, the behaviouralists over enthusiastic pursuits of scientific and quantitative technique has fostered a sterile methodism that has impeded rather than advance political knowledge. The behaviouralists have tended to neglect and ignore vital areas of political science, which are not directly amenable to scientific treatment and quantification. Instead, they have concentrated on the more quantifiable and empirically verifiable but trivial topics of political life (Ayoade, 1985). In other words, the phenomena, which are observable, measurable and occur with regularity, are often the most insignificant aspects of politics. Thus, the behaviouralist have become prisoners of their own methodology since they fail to address themselves to questions of great political significance to their students and politics at large such as: Injustice, poverty, racism and imperialism. The result is that much of behaviouralism is not only trivial but also narrow and apolitical.

It is against this background that Hans Morgenthau (1963) described quantitative political science as “a pretentious collection of trivialities”. In the same perspective, behaviouralism has not completely resolved some crucial methodological problems or dilemmas arising from behavioural approach to the study of politics. There is for example the problem of how meaningful statements about large systems can be made as the basis of investigation into the behaviour of individual political actors. In this regard, behavioural research stands in danger of falling into the fallacy of personifications, that is, the reduction of large-scale phenomena to the individual level as in the more extreme descriptions of national character.

A related methodological dilemma is the problem of using both discrete and aggregate data in behavioural analysis. The difficulty arises out of the fact that what may be true of aggregate need not be true of the individuals who composed them. The reason for this is simple enough, moving from statements about the behaviour of aggregates such as electoral districts to the behaviour of only one individual within the aggregate involves an inference which may be wrong, the use of aggregate data therefore is likely to conceal a good deal of the variants of the behaviour of individual political actors. It is important to note too that the survey method is static, it yields human reactions, which are relevant predominantly at the time of inquiry. This means that the method is unable to capture the essence of political and social changes. Characteristics of the investigator, quality of training, intelligence levels, educational background also contributed to the weakness of the survey method.

Undoubtedly, the new science of politics has evolved into a science of political irrelevance. This stems from its priority of technique over substance instead of looking into substantial political issues, they focus on refining “methodologies for dealing with the subject, logical extrapolations of conceptual frameworks for thinking about it, marginalisation of the subject that are susceptible of measurement for direct observation” (Bull, 1966).

They have contributed to areas relating to quantitative criteria (increasing the number of professions) at the expense of neglecting urgent social problems – potential nuclear holocaust, unending political and social conflicts and increasing mal-development of the majority of world states. The irrelevance of behaviourism is compounded as it regards history as being insignificant. History is concerned with the past of human beings with explanations of how and why certain events and institutions have come about (Glenn, 1961:61). Our conception of history is based on faith. Behaviouralists refuse to align themselves with history, “they are moved by the methodologically admirable resolution to believe nothing which cannot

be shown to be strictly true” (Tinder, 1961:565). The lack of interest with the past has been particularly damaging in the context of the third world. It is in the study of developing countries that an understanding of history is critical or relevant intellectual output is associated with theories that can be fully tested against historical data (Dahl, 1961:771).

Behavioural research has been criticized as an inadequate tool in policy making and in forecasting. Policy making usually involves three elements names: (a) the moral (b) the empirical and (c) the legislative. Given its own assumptions, behaviouralism cannot contribute to the formulation of the value hierarchies which characterized the moral phase of both public policy and foreign policy-making.

The behaviouralists can make its greatest contribution to policy making in the area of empirical analysis of the probable implications of specific policy options. The behaviouralists can play only a minor role in the legislative aspect of policy making since this aspect involves complex circumstances and situations, which probably will be considerably different from those, lay down by pure behaviouralistic theories.

Contrary to the claims of behaviouralists like Charles Mariam, Harold Lasswell and Robert Dahl, behaviouralism can not provide the basis for general forecasts of the future as distinct tentative scientific predictions. Scientific predictions are hypothetical “if”, “then”, kind of statements. It is not a general forecast or a prophecy, while a prediction try to state the several possibilities of future experience, given certain specified conditions, a forecast or prophecy is an unconditional statement of future possibilities. It is therefore wrong for the behaviouralists to attempt to present their hypothetical propositions as unhypothetical forecasts about the future. Forecasting is beyond the capacity of behavioural science.

Not only that, scholars of new science of politics are unable to make useful recommendations. Their narrow research interests, ahistorical

orientation, and over-commitment to the canons of scientific inquiry - especially the value-free outlook - inhibit political behaviouralists from processing data in a manner that could offer workable options involving value systems. While formulating policies, selected individuals are trying to move toward some goals that they believe is desirable and they are therefore compelled to make judgements about the possible ways of reaching that goal and how easy or difficult each goal might be (Dahl, 1984:138). Behaviouralists, however, contend that their paradigms are relevant and that with few exceptions, their theories and policy suggestions are commendable. That corrupt politicians and technocrats are believed by these scholars to be the inhibiting factor of successful implementation of behavioural oriented recommendations. More obvious is the notion that the paradigms, theories, and policy prescriptions of behaviouralists are irrelevant to coming to terms with the contemporary world crises (Onimode, 1998:25).

Be that as it is, in his Presidential Address to the Political Science Association in 1969, David Easton, himself criticized the behavioural approach for concentrating on trivial and irrelevant research and ignoring urgent contemporary social and political problems. Easton acknowledged that behaviouralism is an ideology of social conservatism tempered by modest incrementalism. He then spoke of the need for a post-behavioural resolution which without abandoning scientific sophistication and methodological rigour would promote a political science that is relevant, active and supportive of progressive and constructive social reforms. Increasing recognition has also been given to the fact that to be useful the behavioural approach must complement and incorporate a more traditional, normative and institutional approaches to the study of politics. He made the call with the following words “a new revolution is under way in American political science... its battle cries are relevance and action. Its objects of criticism are the disciplines, the professions, and the universities”, (see Chilcote, 1981:29). According to Mulford Sibley (1967:51-71) too:

If the understanding of politics includes comprehension not only of conduct as it could be under specified conditions but also of what it is, as being will be, and ought to be. We must turn not only to the behaviouralists but also to the historians of political idea, the moral philosopher, the cultural historian, the speculative political philosopher of the classical tradition. The descriptive politicalists and the man of direct political experience.

7. Conclusion: Post Behaviouralism

This era is an attempt to correct the deficiencies of both traditionalism and behaviouralism. The formation of solutions in post behavioural study of international relations and politics generally can be summarised thus:

- (a) that substance must precede technique. In other words, they argue that it is more vital to be relevant for contemporary social problems than to be sophisticated in tools of investigation for the fun of it.
- (b) they also argue that values can not be separated from the study of politics and
- (c) that the behavioural perspective is ideologically conservative because it confines itself only to the description and analysis of facts and does not go beyond that to seek to understand the forces behind the facts.

Indeed, the weaknesses of the behavioural approach contributed to the downfall of this “new science” of politics. In the late 1960s political science moved to the direction of a more methodologically sophisticated traditionalism and a more theoretically meaningful type of behaviouralism. This meant a return to basic concepts of politics and to philosophy which encourages students of politics to prescribe and to act as to improve political life according to human criteria. Behaviouralism, along with all previous paradigms despite its weaknesses remains an integral part of the foundation of contemporary political science. Neither traditionalism nor behaviouralism as contending approaches could be prescribed but rather complementary.

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