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Reflection on the methods of Political Science on both sides of the Atlantic

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For its Ninth Congress in Toulouse (5-7 September 2007), the French Political Science Association (AFSP) invited the American Political Science Association (APSA) to hold a joint “table-ronde”¹, comparing methods on both sides of the Atlantic. It took the form of three consecutive panels, devoted to qualitative and quantitative approaches, to the dimension of time and to contextual and inference problems. During three days, 18 papers were presented, over 60 participants attended, contrasting ways to validate theories and models were discussed at length, illustrated by concrete research examples. The objective here is less to sum up all that was said than to outline the main differences and convergences of our methodologies.

The quali-quantitative debate

It is a fact that in France quantitative approaches are less developed than in the States, where even qualitative researchers have received a basic formation in statistics, and know how to read an equation, a regression line, a factor analysis. In France one tends to give more importance to the historical and philosophical positioning of a problem, training in statistical methods is offered by fewer institutions, rational choice models are not popular (Billordo 2005b, 2006), and quantitative analysis forms a small minority of the articles published in the main reviews (one third of all articles published in *French Political Science Review* between 1970 and 2004 according to Billordo 2005a). The borders between quali and quanti approaches was the issue addressed by the first panel. Where the Americans tended to see distinct epistemologies, different conceptions of causality, “two cultures” (Mahoney and Goertz 2006), the French on the contrary insisted on the necessity to go beyond this opposition, questioning what basically differentiates the two approaches. Is it the fact of counting, opposing those who count to those who give account, in French “ceux qui comptent” vs “ceux qui racontent”? Is it a problem of arithmetic, mathematics, statistics? Is it the number of cases studied, small or big-n? Are survey research and comprehensive interviews, case and variable oriented approaches so antagonist? Where should one put the QCA (Qualitative Comparative Approach) developed by Charles Ragin, based on Boolean logic, which

does not actually count, but puts a phenomenon into an equation according to the presence or absence of certain elements, and the way they combine?

On the whole the divide between qualitative and quantitative methods seems far more institutionalized in the States, where it is embodied in distinct academic departments and recruitment procedures, and is represented by two different methodological standing groups at APSA. But precisely because the separation is less rigid in France, it seems more natural to combine the two approaches, as shown by most of the French papers for the table-ronde. This could be an asset, at a time where all over Europe mixed methods designs, triangulation, and combining comprehensive and explicative approaches, are becoming fashionable (Moses, Rihoux and Kittel 2006).²

Assessing time

The second panel explored the time dimension. The papers apprehended it in many different ways, time as period, as process, as event, as series of sequences, as interval, time as the present moment and time as the past and its memories. The advantages and limitations of several methods were compared with sophisticated models such as survival analysis, optimal matching analysis, protest event analysis. But time is also the specific time of the interview or of the observation, when it takes place, how long it lasts, what relationship settles between interviewer and interviewee. Most participants insisted on the limits of the “one shot” interview to grasp the subjects with their contradictions, their evolutions, and their interactions, for quantitative as well as for qualitative approaches.

Assessing context

The third session enlarged the notion of context. At first we had in mind ecological analysis and the classical problems of inference. But some understood it also as the subjective context, the way people interviewed feel about their surroundings. Others dwelt on how experimentation can manipulate the context in order to test the effect of the variables, in or out the laboratory. Context was also taken in the sense of the scale of analysis selected, and the mul-

¹Co-organised by Nonna Mayer (AFSP) and Andrew Appleton (APSA/French Politics Group). A special thanks to the chairs of APSA’s two methodological sections, Janet Box-Steffensmeier and James Mahoney, who greeted me at their business meeting in APSA’s 2006 Congress in Philadelphia and enthusiastically supported this project, and to the French Politics group whose mediation was essential. The table ronde’s programme and papers summaries (French and English) are available on AFSP’s website, <http://www.congres-afsp.fr/>.

²See for instance the dynamic Standing group on Political Methodology at ECPR (European Consortium for Political Research) chaired by Benoît Rihoux, Jonathon Moses and Bernhard Kittel (ECPR) and the workshop they propose at the coming ECPR session on “Methodological Pluralism? Consolidating Political Science Methodology” (Rennes, 11-16 April 2008).

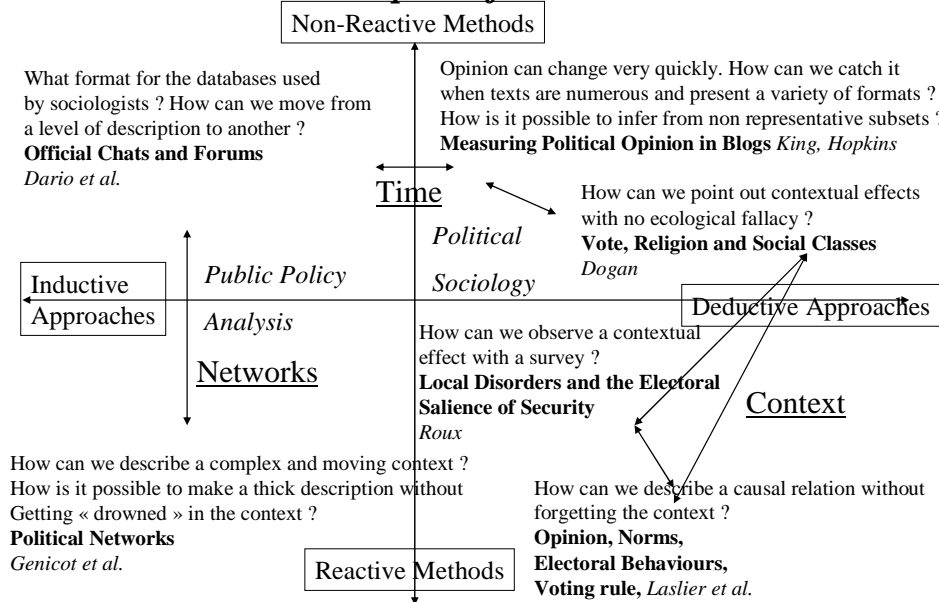
tiple levels—in this case local, national and European—at which on can grasp the relations between actors and the dynamic of their opinions, both in the instant and in the long run. Finally the debate focused on the new types of context in constant transformation generated by the development of Internet (blogs, mailing lists) and the challenge they represent to the traditional quali and quanti methods.

A common space of discussion

Many questions were asked, many research tracks opened during these three days. If obvious differences appeared in the methods discussed, yet there also was a common space of discussion between qualitativists and quantitativists, which Mathieu Brugidou, chair of the last session, attempted to map in the following graph based on the 6 papers he discussed.

The vertical axis opposes inductive and deductive approaches, those which move from theories and hypotheses to their empirical validation and those which on the contrary, prefer to start by observation and immersion in the field and move up from there. The second axis opposes reactive to non reactive methods. The former deal with tests, surveys, interviews, getting a reaction from the actors observed, the latter deal with a given object already there that they do not influence. For each paper is specified (in boldface) the topic and the methodological issue. The arrows show the possible lines of discussion connecting papers, the objects they have in common are underlined and in italic appears the sub discipline concerned. To fully understand the graph one must go back to the papers, available on the AFSP’s website. Yet even without doing so, it shows that the quali quanti methodological divide is not the only, nor necessarily the most relevant one.

TR1(s3) :Inference, context, new approaches : a common space of discussion ?



The paper by Genicot et al., about public policies actors in Europe, is positioned in the reactive/inductive quadrant, lower left. It shares with Dario et al., (upper left), who study companies forums and chats, a same object: networks, and a similar inductive approach, considering the configuration of the network is not given before hand, it will emerge from the analysis. Yet Genicot and her colleagues have opted for a purely qualitative approach by interviews, while Dario et al., offer a quantitative approach of non reactive data (email lists) to make sense of the evolving configuration of the networks. King et Hopkins who follow the evolution of political opinions expressed in millions of blogs, share with Dario and his colleagues a common moving object, the Net, and the use of sophisticated statistical models. But they are in the upper right quadrant because they give preference to deductive methods, starting with a predefined categorisation of the political opinions they code. Dogan's paper, which offers an ecological analysis of votes, is in the same quadrant and faces with King and Hopkins the common problem of inference. But Dogan also shares a common preoccupation, the effect of context, with Roux who is interested in the subjective perceptions of context by the voters and Laslier and his colleagues who perform electoral experimentations, artificially manipulating context, both situated in the lower right quadrant (deductive-reactive).

The Franco-American table-ronde was but a first step

to confront and exchange our methodological know-how, see how close and how different we are, and overcome the gap between the so called qualitative and quantitative research. We hope it will be followed by many others.

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