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► **To cite this version:**

Colin Hay. Process tracing: a laudable aim or a high-tariff methodology?. *New Political Economy*, 2016, 21 (5), pp.500-504. 10.1080/13563467.2016.1201806 . hal-01402932

HAL Id: hal-01402932

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01402932>

Submitted on 25 Nov 2016

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Process tracing: a laudable aim or a high-tariff methodology?

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It was with considerable pleasure and enthusiasm that I accepted the invitation of Christine Trampusch and Bruno Palier, the editors of this special issue, to respond to their small but excellent collection of papers on process tracing in political economy. Like them (Trampusch and Palier 2016), I am convinced that what they and others typically call process tracing can, if appropriately (and, indeed, sparingly) used, help open the black box of causation in social, political and economy systems; it can, in short, help us fashion better explanations of social, political and economic outcomes. I am also convinced, like them, that the clarification of what process tracing actually entails methodologically, as is the principal aim of this special issue, will help us better make that case.

In the, alas, all too limited space I have, I cannot and hence do not seek to provide a detailed commentary and reflection on each of the papers in this collection. Instead, I will keep my comments very general – using, as my point of departure, the editors' very useful framing essay. I will confine myself to three appreciative, though at the same time critical yet I hope constructive, observations in the hope of advancing the debate.

A laudable ambition but not a methodology

My first observation is almost certainly the most important. It arises from a long-standing concern of mine that the term 'process tracing' mislabels what it seeks both to describe and, invariably (and as here), to proselytise for. In short, process tracing is not a methodology but an ambition. That ambition is, I think, a most laudable ambition in that social science is, for me, better placed to explain social outcomes if it is able, credibly, to identify, track and trace the causal processes at play. But process tracing is, and still remains, a very considerable methodological challenge. For *identifying*, let alone *tracing*, processes is not easy. And the danger is that by labelling one's method in terms of one's ambition one, perhaps presumptuously and prematurely, implies that the challenge has already been resolved: that, in other words, if one uses the methodology proposed one is already tracing processes (having, presumably, first identified them).

Put bluntly, it is not always clear to me that self-identified process tracers have either resolved the methodological challenges that their self-identification as process tracers implies they think they have nor, to the extent that they have succeeded in this (admittedly difficult) task, that they have done so better than other social scientists interested in questions of change over time. Whether that suspicion is warranted or not, process tracers would be well advised, I think, to specify more precisely both the challenge of process tracing as they see it and the distinct nature of the methodological innovation they propose to deal with it. For me, this special issue shows that, at present, they remain better able to do the former than the latter. Indeed, what also concerns me is that, in their seeming haste to imply that they have resolved the methodological challenge of process tracing and their desire to declare this a victory for a recently forged community of process tracers, they

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have overlooked a lot of useful methodological and practical advice from non-declared process tracers which might help them in their declared (but still only partially realised) task. Process tracers, in other words, do not have a monopoly over process tracing.

For me (and with one caveat to which I will return at the end), all good social science traces processes and always has. This is not to argue that there is not considerable value in reflecting systematically, as self-declared process tracers undoubtedly do, on how one might best identify, track and trace processes. But it is to argue that there is potentially much more to draw into that reflection than that lineage of scholarship initiated by cognitive psychologists' turn to what they first called process tracing in the 1970s (Falletti 2016: 1). Indeed, to be honest, that tradition of scholarship is not where I would start looking for insight – not least because cognitive process tracing might well be rather easier to observe empirically (and in real time) than many of the social, political and economic processes that we might be interested in (a point to which we return presently). Process identification is logically prior to process tracing and may be rather more difficult in social systems, requiring perhaps a further (and prior) set of methodological reflections.

A methodology or a family of methodologies

This brings us to a second set of issues: the degree of specificity and singularity of the process tracing methodology proposed by self-declared process tracers. At times process tracing seems like little more than the bringing of a historical sensibility to (invariably, if not exclusively) qualitative case study analysis. As Alexander L. George, usually regarded as the first to use the term in political science, puts it, process tracing is simply the application of 'the historian's methodology of explanation' (1979: 46).¹ The implication of such a comment is that, in advocating process tracing one is simply advocating a more historically grounded and historically sensitive political science (or, indeed, political economy).

Yet, on other occasions and in the hands of other exponents and advocates, process tracing seems like rather more – a precise (if not always precisely specified), exacting and distinct methodology (in the singular), the application of which serves to unlock where otherwise it would remain stubbornly unyielding the black box of causation. The implication of this is altogether different. Here process tracing is something new, something distinctive and something which, certainly if achieved with methodological sophistication, allows us a fresh and previously unprecedented purchase on causal processes as they unfold over time.

In this latter variant, to engage in process tracing is far from just to display a general historicising and contextualising disposition that leads one to track and trace over time the processes whose causal efficacy one seeks to establish. It is, instead, to pick a specific and singular method (or at least methodology) as the only and best way to sift between contending causal mechanisms. The closest to such an approach in the present collection of papers is that offered by Kreuzer (2016), deploying Bayesian logics. Yet, to be fair to him (and to his considerable credit), he does not claim that Bayesian process tracing offers some kind of analytical panacea that is universally applicable when it comes to establishing causal mechanisms. He is almost certainly right not to do so.

But in the absence of such a claim (or an equivalent claim with respect to some non-Bayesian approach to process tracing), we are left with something of a gulf – between the ambition and expectation of process tracing to not only open the black box of causation but to fill it with 'cogs and wheels', on the one hand, and the methodological means to deliver that ambition on the other.

Here again I would make a plea for pluralism. If process tracing is seen not as a method, nor even as a methodology, but as an ambition then it is not difficult to see that it is likely to present not one but a series of different methodological challenges that are best responded to in a variety of different ways. In a sense, the challenge of process tracing is not, in the end, a common or a general one. Different approaches have different stakes in process tracing. For the processes they seek to identify play a different role (and have a different status) in the explanations they seek to fashion (to the extent to which they seek to fashion explanations at all). Accordingly, the nature of the challenge is itself

dependent on the specific research question being posed and (as Trampusch and Palier themselves hint) the epistemological and ontological stance or perspective *from which* it is posed. The point is that if there is no general methodological challenge that process tracing poses, there can be no common methodological solution. Or, in other words, the case for process tracing as an ambition cannot be made in methodological terms.

That might sound like a rather negative conclusion. But it has important implications which might even be seen as liberating. The first implication is that potentially important insights in the tracing of putatively explanatory causal mechanisms and processes can be generated through the deployment of a vast range of potential methodologies – both qualitative and quantitative. There is something of a tendency to associate process tracing methodologies with qualitative techniques, just as there is a tendency to associate it with the ‘thick description’ of a limited number of cases. But that, I think, is misguided. There is no a priori reason to think that the process of, say, crisis narration (the construction of a given crisis as one of public debt rather than of economic growth, for instance), is best traced through the privileging of qualitative over quantitative data (or, for that matter, the converse). Indeed, the more one thinks about it, the more likely it is that a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses will better illuminate the process being scrutinised.

Similarly, if rather more heretically, there is no a priori reason why process tracing inferences need always rely on diachronic analysis (in which data are collected sequentially over time). Put slightly differently, there is no a priori reason why process tracing always and necessarily requires the detailed description of evidence as it unfolds in real time. It is not difficult to see how inferences of potentially considerable significance in adjudicating between contending accounts of the causal mechanisms and processes at play in any given social system or context might be drawn from comparative static analyses (which compare and contrast the situation prevailing at different points in time without gathering data on the intervening moments). It hardly needs to be pointed out that where such inferences can be drawn from comparative static rather than diachronic analyses in this way, the former should be preferred – since they are far less research intensive (a point to which we return below).

One of the reasons for this, hinted at above, is that processes themselves are not always easily identified. Much of the process tracing literature tends to assume that tracing processes is simply a case of gathering the appropriate data over time. But this is to assume that the identification of the process is simple and self-evident – that the process is, in effect, directly visible to us if only we are prepared to look for it. A moment’s reflection reveals that this is rarely the case. Natural selection and social or economic selection are good examples. Both might credibly be inferred from a range of evidential sources. But neither can be observed directly – and whether the evidence is consistent with any posited selection mechanism of this kind is, and must always remain, a matter of interpretation. Recognising this widens the range of potential methods and sources of data from which discriminating inferences might be drawn – and that widening takes us beyond the convenient simplicity of the idea that to trace processes one only needs to track social practices over time as they unfold (through the exhaustive gathering of sequential descriptive data over time).

Finally, whilst process tracing certainly brings political scientists and political economists closer to historians in their methodological choices, it is important not to forget the profound investment of other disciplines in diachronic analysis (the above caveat about such an approach as a means to trace processes notwithstanding). For, it is by no means simply historians who seek to track social practices over time without privileging particular moments as discrete data points. Anthropologists and ethnographers more generally (in a range of disciplines) have always sought to preserve as best they can the quality of their data by gathering it over time (thereby preserving its temporal character and context). They have, of course, tended to be reluctant to assume that their methodology allows them to capture directly social processes in practice. But arguably that reluctance is well-founded. Indeed, there is potentially much that process tracers in political science and political economy might gain by reflecting on anthropologists’ typical modesty when it comes to inferring the existence of social processes from the social practices they analyse. But the key point here is that historians have no monopoly over the methodologies one might typically associate with process tracing.

High-tariff methodology

A third and final set of observations pulls in a rather different direction. Process tracing or, more accurately, the methodologies typically associated with it, are what might be termed high-tariff methodologies. They are, certainly in comparison with other social scientific methodologies, research and labour intensive, costly and time-consuming. As such, I would suggest, they need to be used sparingly. We need a good justification for their deployment and that justification cannot simply be offered at the most general and abstract level – the argument that, in effect, (good) process tracing produces good political science and good political economy.

Thus, whilst I would and do readily accept the claim that there is ultimately little valuable analysis of social, political and economic process that does not proceed from and rely, at least to some extent, on the deployment of high-tariff methodologies of this kind, it is not for such methodologies per se but for the process tracing ambition they might facilitate that we should be arguing. As this suggests, the justification for this or that combination of methods needs to be made on a case by case (or study by study) basis (in full recognition of the complex trade-offs between potential insight and tariff already alluded to).

Indeed, one might take this observation a little further. Put bluntly, not all social science (and not even all good social science) needs process tracing. Whether, ultimately, processes need to be identified, tracked and traced in order for them to be seen as causally effective depends on one's conception of causation and explanation – and this varies between analytic traditions in political science and political economy (on which see, especially, Dowding 2016: 36–67, 133–59).

Consider rational choice theory. In general, I would contend, it has no need of process tracing. Why? Because the formal models that are its stock-in-trade are deemed explanatory (by rational choice theorists) *despite* the acknowledged implausibility of their analytic assumptions (the perfect rationality and narrow instrumentality of actors, the transitive structure of their preferences, the material character of their interests and so forth). As such, the processes and (ostensibly causal) mechanisms these formal models describe do not need to exist in the real world (such that one might find direct evidence of them in and through the deployment of process tracing methodologies) in order for them to be seen to explain the outcome the model predicts. That the prediction is confirmed is sufficient. Process tracing is here entirely redundant because the process posited in the model cannot really exist (and if it does not exist one would not expect to find evidence of it).

Of course, one might well use such an argument as the basis for a critique of rational choice theorists' claim to explain political and economic outcomes – on the (more than credible though still largely normative) grounds that stylised models predicated on unrealistic analytic assumptions positing causal processes that cannot and do not exist (in the sense that they cannot be corroborated through process tracing) should not be regarded as explanatory even where their expectations ('predictions') are borne out by the facts (see, for instance, Hay 2004). But that is not really the point here. More significant, in the context of this special issue, is that the capacity to identify, track and trace processes empirically and in real time is a requirement only for those theoretical perspectives that reject simple Humean notions of causation (which conceive of causation in terms of 'constant conjunction'). If, in order to explain an outcome, we need to produce a credible mechanism and if the credibility of the mechanisms we posit can only be established empirically, then we need process tracing (see also Beach 2016). That makes me, for one, a process tracer. But there are plenty of social scientists who think differently and for many of them process tracing is, at best, an unnecessary high-tariff distraction.

Note

1. The comment contains a rather problematic confusion or conflation of epistemology and methodology in the sense that one cannot have, of course, a 'methodology of explanation'. But the important point here is that, this notwithstanding, the author sees process tracing as a (pre-existing) methodology of historical analysis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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