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Rethinking the definition and role of ontology in political science

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Abstract:

Ontological reflexivity is consistently posited as an important part of being a political scientist, yet the relevant literature has been criticised for being both complex and confused. In this context, the article has three aims: to clarify the purpose of ontology in the discipline; to highlight how ontological assumptions cannot be separated from other factors; and show the relevance of ontological reflexivity. While the extant literature implies that such assumptions emerge from philosophical reflection, this article shows how epistemological decisions, mundane interests and political orientation can be just as important. Consequently, the original aims of the literature can be reinstated.

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Discussions regarding the role and purpose of ontology are becoming increasingly prominent within political science (e.g. Bates and Jenkins 2007, Hay 2006, 2007, Pleasants 2009). Within this literature, the concept is often problematically defined in terms relating to ‘the character of the world as it actually is’ (Hall 2003: 374) with ontological reflexivity posited as an important component of being a political scientist (e.g. Hay 2002: 64). Ontological assumptions have been shown to be important because they influence the explanations they underpin. Yet from where do such assumptions emerge? Why do political scientists assume the things about social and political reality they do? While the relevant literature does not ask these questions directly, it is implied that ontological assumptions should be reflected upon via engagement with conceptualisations of ontological dualisms, such as structure-agency and ideational-material. Yet with these conceptual refinements becoming increasingly abstract and complex there is some disquiet over the saliency and utility of ontological reflexivity. While some practically minded political scientists may consider ontology ‘best left to pseudos corner’ (see Bale 2006: 102), other researchers brand the literature as confused (Bates and Jenkins 2007) and philosophically inaccurate (Pleasants 2009: 886). These two views of the literature as both pretentious and muddled is hardly a glowing reference. It is perhaps understandable, then, why some political scientists are yet to be convinced by the claim that ‘ontology matters’ (Hay 2006: 79). In this context, this article has three main aims: first, to clarify the definition and purpose of ontology in political science; second, to highlight how ontological assumptions cannot be separated from other institutional, disciplinary or normative concerns; and third, to highlight how ontology can be relevant to political scientists.

This article is comprised of two further substantial sections. The first aims to define ontology and elaborate on the role of ontological reflexivity in the discipline. The second aims to highlight how ontological assumptions do not necessarily emerge from philosophical reflection but are, in addition, implicated with numerous other factors.

What is (and what is not) ontology in political science?

As the introduction highlighted, the ontology literature is perceived in some quarters to be overly complex and/or misleading. With this in mind, this section aims to clarify and define the role of ontology in political science. The emphasis on ontology *in* political science is far from accidental. One underlying theme of this article is to highlight how philosophy and social theory have different aims from political science, suggesting they also require different conceptions of ontology. One reason the literature is sometimes perceived as unnecessarily complex and confusing is the sometimes sloppy and irrelevant import of concepts and language from philosophy (Bates and Jenkins 2007). The aim here then, to reiterate, is to define the role of ontology *in political science*. The purpose of this, in addition to the previously stated aims, is to address recent work that critiques the literature based on philosophical definitions of ontology (e.g. Pleasants 2009). Rather than the political science definition and debate being ‘wrong’, there is a need to appreciate how political science and philosophy are different disciplines with different traditions and aims. Consequently, they require different definitions of ontology.

This forthcoming argument is dependent upon dividing political science into two stylised ‘orders’. *First-order* political science, clearly the primary aim of most scholars in the discipline, is to explain politics (see Parsons 2007). More specifically, first-order political science aims to construct arguments or explanations of (‘real life’)

political events and phenomena by asking questions such as ‘what caused x’ or ‘how did y happen?’ In contrast, *second-order* political science does not focus upon actual ‘politics’ in the conventional sense. It instead concerns making sense of how political scientists themselves understand and conceptualise politics. This could involve, for instance, critiquing an existing explanation for an unrealistic agential assumption or attempting to clarify the concept of power. Second-order political science is necessarily self-referential, reflexive and ‘meta’ (and as such, to an extent ‘parasitical’) since it necessarily depends on the pre-existence of explanations. Thus, second-order political science cannot and should not tell us much about politics itself, but can and should tell us about (existing explanations and approaches within) political science.

Explanation has a very specific meaning here, and diverges considerably from the classic concept in philosophy of social science, in which the term is conflated with prediction and contrasted dichotomously with interpretation or *verstehen* (e.g. Flyvbjerg 2001). The usage of explanation here, in contrast, indicates an attempt to answer how or why something political happened. So, for instance, the question of why social democracy has declined is often explained through the effects of globalisation on the nation-state, or the power of states is often explained by their relative military or economic strength. This understanding thus incorporates *descriptions* of how something happened without necessarily appealing to causal logics or mechanisms. Explanations are not the only aspect of first-order political science. Whether acknowledged or not, explanations are typically embedded within a particular context (e.g. cultural, temporal, geographical, etc.) and are not necessarily generalisable beyond that. However, there are, of course, strategies to increase the extent to which an explanation can be generalised beyond the immediate context.

Comparative political science, for instance, aims to search for patterns in variables amongst a series of explanations from more than one context to purport a more generalisable *theory*. Furthermore, we can also distinguish *approaches*, such as rational choice theory or historical institutionalism, which represent pre-packaged meta-theoretical apparatus for generating explanations. Consequently, approaches should be analysed and evaluated as second-order because they, in principle, explain little about politics.

In contrast, ontology in political science concerns the implicit and simplifying assumptions about political ‘reality’ that *underpin* explanations of political phenomenon. The analysis and discussion of ontological assumptions should therefore be considered a second-order endeavour. Consequently, ontology should not be defined as ‘the world as it actually is’ but instead as ‘*the world as political scientists assume it to be*’. In order to explain the political world, it is necessary – whether implicitly or explicitly – to commit to a certain (ontological) view of what is possible in social reality. Thus, explanations, theories and approaches all contain ontological assumptions. Part of political science is the parsimony-complexity trade-off (see Hay 2002: 29-37). This trade-off is an epistemological concern since justifications for parsimony or complexity are often driven by the kind of knowledge desired. Whilst rational-choice researchers may be keen to make simplified ontological assumptions about utility-maximising actors in order to build more parsimonious explanations, some cultural anthropologists disregard the idea of parsimonious explanations altogether in favour of contextually specific rich interpretations. However, even a cultural anthropologist will have to make some form of simplifying (ontological) assumption, perhaps that culture and identity constitute social reality. No matter where placed on the parsimonious-complexity trade-off,

ontological assumptions are logically simplifying to some extent. Lay explanations highlight the role of simplifying assumptions. For instance, a popular factor often given for the electoral success of Barack Obama is his excellent oratory skills and charisma. For this explanation to be possible it is assumed that actors' personal skills and abilities can, in part, cause important political events. In other words, it is committing to a position within the structure and agency debate.

Ontological assumptions cannot be divorced from epistemological and methodological concerns. No ontologically neutral epistemological claims can be made: 'to commit oneself to an epistemology is also to commit oneself to a position on a range of ontological issues' (Hay 2007: 117). The 'directional dependence model' (Hay 2002) highlights this relationship. Showing this connection is important for the argument made later on: that is, to commit to an epistemological position is to (implicitly) commit to an ontological position. As the ideal-type, the directional dependence model prescribes that ontological assumptions *should* logically precede epistemological and methodological assumptions creating a path of dependency meaning that all three sets of assumptions are conceptually linked and realistic. Likewise, within this model it is deemed logically impossible to make an ontologically neutral epistemological decision due to this directional dependence. However, what this means in practice is rather simpler and different. For example, if a researcher were inclined to generate causal knowledge claims, possibly through the use of explanatory quantitative methods, then it would not be logical for this researcher to then assert that political reality is constituted through meaning and language.

This model relates to the parsimony-complexity trade-off. The chances of creating a simplified generalisable explanation of politics (an epistemological assumption) is

increased if simplifying assumptions about social reality (an ontological decision) are made. Therefore, all political science explanations are underpinned by necessarily simplifying assumptions about the nature of reality, which in turn may emerge from epistemological choices. However, the literature problematically defines ontology as what exists in 'reality'. This implies that ontological dualisms such as structure-agency may allow researchers some first-order analytical purchase. In contrast, a distinctively second-order definition of ontology would not make similar implications. Instead, ontological dualisms would be considered as useful heuristic devices for making sense of the assumptions behind existing explanations and approaches. This is consistent with what I have described as 'second-order' political science.

Why do political scientists assume the things they do?

The literature says very little directly on the subject of how ontological assumptions emerge (Hay 2005: 41). In many ways, this is unsurprising, particularly because it is not possible to conduct such an analysis without first committing to a series of ontological and epistemological assumptions (which I, of course, must also make in the remainder of the article). This inescapable irony is noted, but should not prevent the endeavour altogether because otherwise such discussions would not even be possible. Nevertheless, in regard to how political scientists make ontological assumptions some preliminary answers can be gathered from reading the literature from in-between the lines. While the literature often rightly claims that ontological dualisms are perennial *problematiques* with no solution (Jenkins 2005: 6, Hay 2006: 82), they also tend to somewhat paradoxically offer conceptual refinements to these unsolvable dichotomies: e.g. structure-agency (McAnulla 2002), material-ideational (e.g. Marsh 2009), mind-body (e.g. Jenkins 2005). So, the question becomes, if ontological dualisms cannot be solved then why do political scientists seek to offer

increasingly complex conceptualisations? It is presumably because such problematiques allow political scientists to reflect on their own assumptions, as well as the assumptions of others, and avoid making the simplistic structuralist or intentionalist mistakes of yesteryear. Such simplistic underpinnings should indeed be critiqued on the basis of unrealistically limiting the potential for human agency or failing to consider how structures favour certain actors and strategies. But the value of incrementally more complex conceptualisations is rarely justified through this.

Furthermore, in tandem with the ideal-type of the directional dependence, this aspect of the literature also implies that ontological assumptions should emerge from engagement with philosophically oriented literature. Yet there is little reflection on whether this ideal type accurately reflects academic practice and, more importantly, whether this would have any implications for foundations of their arguments. A second reading of the directional-dependence model could also imply that ontological assumptions sometimes derive from epistemological decisions (Hay 2006: 92). This is why the directional-dependence model outlined earlier is important, because it demonstrates how seemingly innocuous epistemological or methodological decisions can influence assumptions about social reality. If some ontological assumptions are inextricably tied up with epistemological decisions, then the next step should involve the analysis of the process that, in part, gives rise to epistemological assumptions. This section aims to do just that.

Epistemological decisions can influence or generate ontological assumptions. Colin Hay (Hay 2006: 92) has shown the adverse affects of searching for generalizable knowledge (an epistemological decision) on the ontological assumptions and resulting explanations of rational choice theory. Yet, the extent of epistemological decision-making extends beyond the understandable ambition to theorise politics. It

sometimes is influenced by academic norms emerging from the discipline as well as regulatory and funding bodies. One possible criticism of the literature on ontology is that it is irrelevant to the majority of political scientists who are driven by a ‘mundane instrumentality’ in which ‘what counts is what works’ (Bale 2006: 102). Yet, this mundane instrumentality often manifests itself in the form of epistemological decisions, which may then influence ontological assumptions. Other researchers have made similar arguments, albeit not directly. For instance, Alan Bryman (2007) argues that the quantitative-qualitative ‘paradigm wars’ have been superseded by a certain ontological and epistemological pragmatism in which philosophical reflection is rendered obsolete in the pursuit of further funding and publications. When interviewing a number of leading social scientists Bryman found that:

when asked about how far epistemological and ontological issues concerned them, most interviewees depicted themselves as pragmatists who felt it necessary to put aside such issues to secure funding for their research interests and to publish their findings (2007: 17).

Meanwhile, Clare Donovan’s (2005) analysis starts from the observation that non-political scientists, whom often impose inappropriate regulation in adjudicating the strength of research, regulate the discipline. The consequence, for Donovan, is the rise of a ‘slave social science’ in which positivism, the epistemological approach most associated with natural science, becomes dominant despite, perhaps, the misgivings some may have over its ontological ramifications. This suggests that ontological assumptions do not necessarily emerge from conscious deliberation with solutions to philosophical dualisms but are inextricably linked to a number of factors including the (perceived) epistemological biases of regulatory and funding bodies.

Some research may be driven by epistemological concerns, while other research may be equally driven by political concerns. The famous Miliband-Poulantzas debate is briefly drawn upon here for illustrative purposes. The aim here is not to highlight how researchers' normative orientation leads to certain ontological assumptions. Such an endeavour is simply not possible because normative orientation cannot be separated from ontological and epistemological assumptions. Instead, the aim is to show that research, and the relevant underpinning assumptions, are inherently and inextricably tied up with the politics of the researcher. The Miliband-Poulantzas debate, which was played out in the pages of *New Left Review*, influenced debates on whether the state is essentially capitalist or not and whether a Marxist method can be explicitly identified. While it is impossible to state what either scholar intended politically, it is possible to show how making certain ontological assumptions was crucial in order to avoid undermining political motives. Whilst Miliband (1970) took an instrumentalist approach in which the state is conceptualised as a neutral apparatus that is defined by the actors who inhabit it, Poulantzas (1969) took a structuralist approach in which the state is conceptualised as an objective structure that always works in the favour of capital (see Barrow 2002). Miliband's political views on the possibility of using *the state* to achieve parliamentary socialism are well known. Thus, for Miliband, whether he was aware of it or not, the debate extended beyond analytical concerns. If the state can only be capitalist, as is claimed by Poulantzas, then Miliband's entire political project would be flawed. The implications of this argument can potentially extend beyond the inherent entanglement of normative aspirations and ontological assumptions, but could even extend to incorporate the self-identity and reflexivity of the researcher: how they conceptualise the discipline, what they see their responsibilities as, and what they prioritise are all factors that are

inherently bound up in the direction of their research and, by logical extension, the underlying assumptions.

Conclusion

The implications of this argument could certainly be grim. Does this mean that all ontological assumptions are mere ad-hoc rationalisations of a desire to either to fulfil a mundane instrumentalism or to forward a particular political position? Worse still, does it suggest that political explanations are a mere extension of, and thus reducible to, the reflexive self-identity of the researcher, implying that political analysis is essentially redundant? Whilst there is a case to be made for this – after all, it cannot be denied that the particular approaches adopted by some researchers tend to reflect certain personality types – the answer to these questions is a clearly emphatic no. What it does show, however, is that such epistemological decisions should be taken seriously since they can influence analysis and explanations. Ontology is not necessarily the ‘free choice’ of researchers – something reached after weighing up the different alternative dichotomous approaches from social theory in a vacuum away from the practical constraints of the discipline as implied in the literature – but influenced by the wider norms and values of the academic communities and funding or regulatory bodies as well as the political orientation of the researcher. If such claims are valid then surely this provides a solid case for demonstrating how and why ‘ontology matters’, which the current literature fails to always do convincingly.

The literature should move away from asking seemingly first-order questions such as to ‘what extent, we, as individuals, have the ability to direct our lives in the face of sometimes enormous constraints’ (McAnulla 2002: 291). Discussions about ontology should be instead embedded within second-order questions that, for instance, question

the political implications of the underlying assumptions of an explanation. This subtle redirection could ensure that instead of focussing on refining conceptualisations of ontological problematiques that are not immediately valuable to all political scientists, the literature instead focuses on how certain ontological assumptions underpin existing explanations and approaches. If epistemological decisions influence ontological assumptions, which in turn effects explanations of politics, then surely the place of ontological reflexivity is, in theory, safe – but only if the current focus of some of the literature is reoriented.

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