Emerging scholars bring the case study approach back-in

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on case study research, which showcases cutting edge research by emerging scholars on France, describes the connection between these articles and current developments in political science methodology. SI contributors situate their analyses in thick description of France itself, demonstrating how modernity, rationality, common sense, citizenship, and democracy are inherently abstract concepts that only take on political meaning and significance within a specific national context. Simultaneously, these essays flesh out mid-level theories that are more amenable to cross-national generalization without losing rigor in the process, contributing to broader political science literature on experience versus reason, the European and Christian roots of secularism and how this contributes to contemporary discrimination, welfare state development, and political lawyering and the judicialization of politics.

Keywords Case study · Thick description · “French touch”

Situating the special issue in political science and the study of French politics

As David Collier noted 9 years ago, “Political science is in a period of major innovation in refining tools for quantitative analysis, and in particular, quantitative tools for causal inference” (2011: 829). Scholarship on France has reflected these innovations, and the pages of *French Politics* have been no exception.¹ Collier himself, however, is one of the many faces representing a disciplinary shift as political scientists return to qualitative research. Collier and Elman (2008) describe this shift in the following way: “After two decades of relative quiescence, with a fairly stable canon consisting mainly of works published in the 1970s, this branch of methodology has been experiencing a resurgence” (779).²

¹ See, for example, Adams et al. (2005), Foucault (2006) and Lewis-Beck et al. (2008).

² See also Goertz (2017), Mahoney and Goertz (2006), McBride and Mazur (2010), Wedeen (2010) and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006).

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The emergence of APSA's Organized Section on Qualitative and Multi-Method Research in 2003 has been a considerable force in this shift. The Organized Section has sponsored APSA short courses on qualitative methodology, variously defined; it has hosted methods cafés; and it has led APSA working groups on qualitative methodology. Each of these initiatives has contributed to the training, encouragement, and professional support of political scientists who employ qualitative approaches in their research. These initiatives have avoided generating inflexible definitions about qualitative and multi-method research and have opted instead to provide space for debate and discussion aimed at improving the rigor of our studies and, ultimately, our understanding of the political world.³ As Collier and Elman (2008) put it,

The objective here is emphatically not to burden the discipline with methodological preoccupations to a degree that is counterproductive. Rather, it is to provide tools for addressing the substantive questions that make political science a worthwhile enterprise. (791)

Despite the growing interest in studies using qualitative scholarship, graduate education in political science does not always provide the kind of support required to produce scholars capable of “strong reliance on thick knowledge of cases” (Collier and Elman 2008: 781–782). Part of this is related to global austerity trends and the impoverishment of higher education: for example, here in the US, Congress is continually threatening Fulbright funding, and in 2013 the Department of State eliminated funding for language and cultural instruction pertinent to Eastern Europe and Eurasia (Morello 2017; King 2015).

In such a climate, is it any wonder that the recent “return of the single-country study” has, according to Pepinsky (2019), emphasized “methodological expertise” over “substantive political knowledge” (201)? The latter requires time spent on-site, possibly language training, and country-specific coursework that is likely found outside a political science department. Pepinsky references an APSA newsletter to summarize scholarly consternation about current trends in single-country studies within the subfield of comparative politics:

A 2015 issue of the Comparative Politics Newsletter from the American Political Science Association's Comparative Politics Section identified mounting concerns about the relationship between quantitative, causal identification-focused CP research, and substantive political knowledge. Chandra (2015) describes errors in substantive knowledge about Indian and South Asian politics in the single-country quantitative research that she encounters. Geddes (2015) worries that PhD training places such high demands on students that they have little time to develop substantive expertise or political intuition. (200)

³ The author in particular recalls attending a pre-conference workshop on Interpretative Methods at APSA in 2009 and witnessing a lively debate over whether causal inference need always be the end goal and measure of success for interpretive methods.

Within this paradoxical context of increased disciplinary interest in qualitative methods but decreased institutional support for area studies, and contrary to the current trend of substantively weak quantitative single-country studies, a newer cohort of France scholars in the USA has returned to thick description and an embrace of single-case study design. These tenacious and gifted scholars have found ways to conduct fieldwork and archival research in France and to supplement their graduate studies with the kind of country-specific training that is not often on offer in political science graduate programs. And importantly for the ongoing conversation about qualitative methods and rigor in political science, their research supports the position that thick description and single-country studies can produce knowledge that is generalizable and that helps with theory building. This lesson is similar to that of Lisa Wedeen (2010) on ethnographic political science research: “Rather than fleeing from abstractions, ethnographies”—or, in this case, thick description and single-country studies—“can and should help ground them” (257).

This special issue showcases cutting edge qualitative scholarship by this new cohort of emerging scholars that explores, through thick description and a single-country case study approach, the themes of modernity, rationality, and democratic self-governance. In each of the four cases examined (early twentieth century French political thought, French *laïque* public space, French mental hospitals, and French courts), the contributors situate their analysis in nuanced readings of France itself. Thanks to the authors’ studied sensitivity to the political, historical, and ideological particularities of France, we see how the French context—which features a strong unitary state with centralizing tendencies and an uneasy relationship with liberalism, republican universalism alongside a long colonial history, and both a *laïque* and Catholic heritage—shapes French debates around how to be modern, how to understand common sense, how the entitlements and obligations of citizenship ought to be meted out, and how to engage in democratic self-governance.

The result, however, is not a tired story of “French exceptionalism”; instead, it is an invitation to regard modernity, rationality, common sense, citizenship, and democracy as inherently abstract concepts that only take on political meaning and significance within a specific national context. Simultaneously, these essays flesh out mid-level theories that are amenable to cross-national generalization without losing rigor in the process, contributing to broader political science literature on experience versus reason, the European and Christian roots of secularism and how this contributes to contemporary discrimination, welfare state development, and political lawyering and the judicialization of politics.

In short, the authors of these four pieces have taken to heart the scholarly agenda Elgie et al. mapped out in their (2016a, b) OUP Handbook on French Politics and “the outside-in/inside-out approach” that still retained a “French touch.”⁴

⁴ Also see Mazur’s (2019) discussion of this research agenda in her introductory essay to the reprint of the conclusion to the Handbook in the memorial issue of French Politics that paid tribute to Robert Elgie. The Handbook was released in paperback form in 2020.

In this context, the outside-in perspective has become more pronounced. Scholars of France are now more familiar with comparative scholarship and have found fruitful ways of incorporating it into their research. There has also been a revival of the inside-out perspective. The French focus on political sociology and micro-level studies, including policy studies, has resonated elsewhere, particularly in Europe. There is also a middle-range position where the study of particular areas is considered to have a “French touch.” What this usually means is that scholars are aware of international academic developments, but they are also aware of the specific French context in which those developments have occurred, with scholarship reflecting the mix of these two traditions. (Elgie et al. 2016b: 681)

In other words, all four authors turn broader scholarly debates within political science in on their analyses of French politics while also using the French context to demonstrate the additional knowledge that is obtained when we opt for thick descriptions (rather than cross-national generalizations) of modernity, rationality, and democratic self-governance.

When Donna Haraway (1988) defines feminist objectivity as “situated knowledges,” she is opposing it to the standard model of objectivity within the western sciences, that “of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (581, 583). This traditional model of objectivity is “unlocatable” because it is literally disembodied, issued from the invisibility of a whiteness and maleness that is not scrutinized or placed under study as women and people of color are; it is irresponsible because it places itself beyond question, and hence is “unable to be called into account” (583). The research in this special issue “situates” the typically abstracted concepts of modernity, rationality, and democracy in the sense that it locates them within thick descriptions of France. Thanks to this, we simultaneously learn more about France and more about how these abstract concepts are sites of political contention, where local debates, values, and beliefs are contested with the veneer of objectivity.

Thus, this collection of articles reflects both a healthy methodological pluralism within the study of French Politics, and the increasing convergence between the study of French Politics and developments in Political Science more broadly speaking.

The rest of this introduction tells the story of how this special issue came about, summarizes the major findings of each of the four pieces, and then returns to a larger discussion of what is to be gained from bringing these four authors together in this special issue, both for the study of French politics and political science.

Origins of the special issue

The origins of this special issue lie in the longstanding connection, only recently institutionalized, between the journal *French Politics* and the American Political Science Association’s (APSA) French Politics Group (FPG). In addition to its work

promoting transatlantic scholarly collaboration, the FPG has also been a source of support and mentorship for early-career scholars who study France.⁵ While I was serving as co-chair for the FPG in 2018, I reached out to four early-career scholars—Kevin Duong, Tommaso Pavone, Isabel Perera, and Michelle Weitzel—to ask them if they would be interested in participating in an FPG-sponsored APSA Pre-Conference Workshop.

I had initially been struck by the strength of their scholarship, but I was also intrigued by their research approaches: they all employ thick description and careful historical analysis in their work. Kevin Duong examines how French thinkers throughout the twentieth century understood the place of “experience” versus reason and science in democracy and human emancipation. Michelle Weitzel looks at how the boundaries of membership in France are partly determined, and forcibly maintained, by a kind of “common sense,” specifically, the historically familiar soundscape of Catholic bells. Isabel Perera explains the unusual path of mental health-care provision in France by delving into past trade union advocacy by public mental healthcare providers. Finally, Tommaso Pavone painstakingly recounts decades of incremental work by lawyers and judges to liberalize the French state and relates how these legal actors were informed by centuries of profession-defining struggles and ambitions that came before them.

The goal of the Pre-Conference Workshop was threefold: to share cutting edge scholarship on France with APSA attendees; to bring together four scholars who, while studying different subjects, all studied France and employed a single-case approach and thick description; and finally, to provide these early-career scholars extended, constructive feedback on manuscripts or dissertation chapters from established academics with a record of publication on a related topic. Judith Grant (Ohio University) commented on Kevin Duong’s work; Todd Shepard (Johns Hopkins University) commented on Michelle Weitzel’s work; Margitta Mätzke (Johannes Kepler University) commented on Isabel Perera’s work; and Erik Bleich (Middlebury) as well as James Hollifield (Southern Methodist University) commented on Tommaso Pavone’s work. These senior colleagues assumed this mentorship role fully, preparing thoughtful, detailed feedback; the audience was eager to participate in the conversation as well, and the 4-hour-long workshop was characterized by lively intellectual exchange.

During our discussions, the previously unanticipated thematic commonalities of modernity, rationality, and democratic self-governance emerged among the papers. This, in combination with the shared case study approach, led Amy Mazur to ask me to edit a special issue that would eventually include these four pieces. Thankfully, all four authors agreed to submit their pieces for special issue consideration and to respond to challenging reviewer evaluations (all four were asked to revise and

⁵ I personally benefitted from this: by a stroke of luck, former FPG co-chair Sylvain Brouard was a visiting scholar at the University of Washington while I was there preparing for dissertation fieldwork in France. He helped me secure a visiting researcher position at Sciences Po Bordeaux and assisted me with the construction of my French language consent forms; when I got to France, he opened doors to some extremely useful interviews and provided guidance and support.

resubmit based first on the workshop feedback, then on anonymous reviewer feedback), producing this special issue.

Emerging scholars apply the French touch: shared themes of modernity, rationality, and democratic self-governance

In Kevin Duong's article, "The Left and Henri Bergson," we learn that there is a decidedly French debate over the merits of experience versus reason in the pursuit of human emancipation. The Dreyfus Affair may have dramatized the schism between conservative Catholics and secular leftists, but the French left, argues Duong, was also polarized within itself on the subject of Bergsonian experience. One aspect of the fascination with Bergson among the French left, Duong notes, relates to debates over French colonization. Duong reviews how Négritude thinkers used Bergson's notion of experience to reject the supposed scientific objectivism of French colonialism and to celebrate intuitive African reason; an essentializing move that was not, Duong notes, unproblematic. This was not the extent of their engagement with the concept, however. Duong points out that Négritude writers also used the idea of experience to imagine what democracy might encompass "beyond rational bargaining over private interests." Without ever denying the dangers inherent in reifying lived experience or celebrating it as the key to human emancipation, Duong expresses concern about the potentially undemocratic nature of liberal democratic theory based on the thin premise of libertarian rule-mongering as opposed to the experience of equality in everyday life. For Duong, "it simply is not clear whether democratic theory grounded in rationalist thought adds up to very much democracy." Duong's essay thus contributes to broader political theory debates about reason versus experience and various visions of human emancipation on the political left (Benjamin 1999; Jay 2005; Scott 1991).

Meanwhile, in "Common Sense Politics: Religion and Belonging in French Public Space," Michelle Weitzel looks at how the boundaries of membership in France are partly determined, and forcibly maintained, by a kind of "common sense," specifically, "culturally entrained listening practices," which in France today still include the historically familiar sound of Catholic bells. Taken for granted to the point where French citizens are not always cognizant of hearing them, Catholic bells are normalized as a part of *laïque* French daily life. It can seem reasonable to citizens to associate a Catholic bell with secular public space in part because, with the decline in participation in the Catholic church, many citizens cannot even distinguish between the distinct religious messages that the bells signal. Yet requests (or, more accurately, rumored requests) to publicly sound the Islamic *adhan*, or call to prayer, are perceived as being unreasonable precisely because they are outside common sense; specifically, outside the shared auditory experience that has historically been dominated by Catholic bells. In establishing her argument, Weitzel employs thick description to draw our attention to an actant that has thus far been understudied when examining questions of civic membership and democratic self-governance in France: sound. Weitzel's essay thus contributes to the broader political science and sociology of religion literature on the decidedly European and Christian roots

of secularism and how this plays a part in contemporary discrimination against religious minorities in Europe, as well as the growing and interdisciplinary study of sound as a site and actant of political power (Barras 2014; Selby et al. 2018; Beaman 2017; Bowen 2007; Fernando 2014; Jouili and Moors 2014; Scott 2007).

Isabel Perera's article, "The French Welfare State Revisited: The Puzzling Politics of Mental Health Policy," also examines an understudied issue in French politics: mental healthcare provision. For all the research that has been conducted on French health care, Perera notes that "By and large, the study of the French welfare state has excluded mental health." Perhaps this is because, as she reveals, to understand mental healthcare provision in France requires careful examination of decades of trade union advocacy that has created a system that bears little resemblance to other aspects of the French welfare system, or to mental healthcare provision in the Anglo-American context. Whereas the USA and UK have moved toward deinstitutionalization and privatization, French mental healthcare workers, through their trade unions, have successfully advocated to maintain a robust public service model for mental health care. Once again, we see a scholar grounding her explanations in French particularities: this outcome was made possible in part by France's "deep heritage of social medicine and universalist social policy," and also by the connection between French anticlericalism and the provision of state care for *les exclus*. As Perera writes, "exclusion" (referring to those who cannot access the labor market) "has an extensive history in France as a site of political contestation. State efforts to debilitate Church institutions in the long nineteenth century included numerous battles over the care of the excluded." In France, *les exclus*, Perera notes, "merited government 'protection' on the basis of their vulnerability alone." Mental healthcare providers mobilized this solidaristic conception of the duty of the state toward its citizens (which, as Duong would point out, certainly goes "beyond rational bargaining over private interests") to successfully avoid the liberalization that has reached into all other aspects of French social policy. Perera's essay thus contributes to the comparative public policy literature on the uneven and sometimes unpredictable development of welfare states (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Jones 1993; Morgan 2006).

Finally, Tommaso Pavone examines how French legal actors have historically fought for the political liberalization of the French state out of an aspiration for a more porous state. Pavone's "Lawyers, Judges, and the Obstinate State: The French Case and an Agenda for Comparative Politics" weaves together the literature on political lawyering⁶ and the judicialization of politics in France. Just as Lucien Karpik rejects Tocqueville's thesis that "the French state forged lawyers to serve its need for rationalized rule," Pavone embarks on a thorough deconstruction of the notion that French lawyers or judges have remained mere messengers of the state's efforts to rationalize or legitimate its own authority. Drawing on Hoffman's concept of France as an "obstinate state,"

⁶ Or, as Pavone puts it, "Lawyer-driven political development." As Pavone helpfully notes, political lawyering does not focus on specific causes so much as on institutional change. In France, this has meant lawyers have sought to become spokespersons for civil society, seeing their work as opening up the state to the demands of, and dialoguing with, civil society.

Pavone uses France as a “hard case” to demonstrate the surprising ability of lawyers and judges to push for institutional reforms (here, liberalizing and Europeanizing) even in a famously centralized state that jealously seeks to protect its “claims to executive supremacy and unitary authority.” In this way, Pavone’s essay contributes to the soci-olegal literature on political lawyering and the judicialization of politics (Alter 2001; Cichowski 2007; Conant 2002; Ginsburg 2003; Halliday and Karpik 1997; Hirschl 2008; Kelemen 2011; McCann 2004; Sarat and Scheingold 2006; Stone 1992.).

Conclusion: implications of “the outside-in/inside-out approach”

How is the study of France, and of politics generally, improved when some of its practitioners pursue thick description and single-case study design within the purview of larger methodological and theoretical discussions in the discipline? The answer to this question lies, in part, in a similar disciplinary “return” that took place in the 1980s. In “bringing the state back-in,” Theda Skocpol (1985) and historical institutionalists showed us that a focus on the state need not produce idiosyncratic explanations of “American exceptionalism,” “French exceptionalism,” etc. (3). Theory building is possible even when we zoom in on the state. Similarly, thick description and the case study approach can produce analysis that contributes to broader theorization, without pretensions to the kind of expansive grand theory that masks actual variance in the political world. For example, just because there is nothing very generalizable about, say, France’s particular approach to secularism does not mean that careful analysis of this approach in action cannot tell us something generalizable about how secularism was born in and shaped by a distinctly European and Christian context, or how common sense attitudes about religion across Europe are shaped by a historical soundscape.

The task, then, is to carefully balance two levels of analysis, simultaneously interrogating the case under study and a broader literature of which it provides one articulation: here, reason versus experience in human emancipation; the normative scripts of citizenship and how they are signaled to residents; the development of welfare states; and political lawyering and the judicialization of politics. This dual focus requires a deep familiarity with both disciplinary conversations in political science and the case under study.

Ultimately, these articles demonstrate that explanations of the development of a political ideology or institution can benefit from the kind of “outside-in/inside-out approach” that is made possible by thick description and single-case study design. The real challenge is whether graduate training in the twenty-first century can support this kind of scholarship, or if it will remain limited to those exceptional and lucky scholars who find a way to make it happen.

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