



Political Pseudoscience

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In *The Flight from Reality*, Ian Shapiro casts a critical eye upon important trends in the social sciences, political science in particular. He finds the discipline too method-driven, and makes a case for realism—that is, for letting research questions flow from real problems that present themselves to political actors, rather than from the availability of particular methods. He uses the metaphor of flight to describe a common form of disconnectedness. To fly is to feel a heady sort of freedom and maneuverability, a feeling that may become more absorbing for the flier than whatever is taking place on the ground far below.

According to Shapiro, such disengagement has become increasingly characteristic of the human sciences.

His most damning arguments are directed against those disciplines that, following economics, have “modeled themselves on physics—or at any rate on a stylized version of what is often said to go on in physics.” Here we find “a perverse sense of rigor, where the dread of being thought insufficiently scientific spawns a fear of not flying among young scholars.” The perversity of this sense of rigor lies in the

fact that it is measured not by genuine sensitivity to human experience, but rather by how far one goes in developing a “model” that allows for the display of mathematical prowess.

Such methods generally require fateful simplification. For example, if one assumes that human beings are interested solely in maximizing their own selfish utility, then one can import the quantitative methods of microeconomics into disciplines that concern themselves with realms traditionally regarded as non-economic,

such as political science, sociology, and law. This approach goes by the name of “rational choice theory.” Of course, many

have criticized the unrealistic picture of human beings, indeed of rationality, on which this approach depends. Shapiro’s contribution is to argue that, even taken on its own terms, the rational choice approach fails miserably in political science; it has “degenerated into elaborate exercises geared toward saving . . . theory from discordant encounters with reality.” What it “explains” too often involves merely “stylized facts that turn out on close inspection not to bear much relationship to any political reality.” It speci-

*The Flight from Reality in
the Human Sciences*
By Ian Shapiro
Princeton ~ 2005 ~ 232 pp.
\$24.95 (cloth)

fies theories “so vaguely that they turn out to be compatible with all empirical outcomes”; its failures include “scouring the political landscape for confirming illustrations of the preferred theory while ignoring the rest of the data”; even the alleged confirmations often as not depend on “tendentious descriptions of the political world.”

As Shapiro has shown in his past work, these accusations are not just polemical bombs of the sort humanists often hurl indiscriminately at the social sciences. They are critiques from within. In an earlier book entitled *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (cowritten with Donald P. Green) he goes deep into the rational choice literature to parse its errors in detail. His criticisms are offered in terms that *ought*, at least, to be fully admissible within this literature; his procedure is to take the scientific pretensions of rational choice theory seriously, and thereby to reveal them as *mere* pretensions. By contrast, when humanists (especially those of a postmodern stripe) criticize reductive social science, they tend to *assume* the method is living up to its scientific aspirations, and take the poverty of insight issuing from the method as grounds for a wholesale criticism of modern science altogether. Such critiques are often valuable, but they can gain no hearing among those criticized. Shapiro, on the other hand, cannot be ignored in good faith; he is appealing precisely to the scientific conscience of those who take themselves to be scientists.

Shapiro’s book also seeks to consider “the relations between disengaged human sciences and the reproduction of the social and political order.” Quantitative political science has a tendency to neutralize dissent by (implicitly) positing a spurious consensus, as though all reasonable people must accept the description on offer. In particular, when political science narrows the scope of questions it can ask to those that issue in testable predictions, this can “lead us to undervalue critical reappraisals of accepted descriptions of reality.” Sometimes, what is thought to stand in need of explanation is “so mis-specified that the right causal questions [are] not even on the table.” For example, the political scientist may be looking for “opaque causal mechanisms that produce consent” when the more pertinent facts lie with conditions that render the consent in question spurious, as in the old Soviet politburo.

These shortcomings lead Shapiro to recommend that we conceive the vocation of political *theory* as essentially critical, a gadfly within the larger discipline of political science: “Political theorists have an important role to play in exhibiting what is at stake in taking one [descriptive] cut rather than another”; to display the presuppositions of these descriptions, and propose alternatives.

Shapiro offers this as an alternative to what too often transpires in political theory: the perpetuation of highly abstract polemics by constant recourse

to what he calls “gross concepts.” These are “ideas that feed into and promote misleading dichotomies”—for example, negative freedom (freedom from) versus positive freedom (freedom for). Champions of the first take a minimal view of what society owes people, and champions of the second believe society ought to make sure everyone develops his capacities to the fullest. These abstractions, like other gross concepts, distract from “first-order questions about the world”—in this case, questions about precisely who is free and in what ways.

Political theorists should resist the intellectual allure of gross concepts, Shapiro argues.

Our job is to reel in gross concepts, not to traffic in them. Rather than try to find the right gross concept to champion, we do better to operate as principled social critics whose goal is [to] embellish political argument with political reality. We should be roving ombudsmen for the truth rather than partisans of any particular message.

And this critical posture matters not just to scholars:

This [critical] activity is particularly important when the defective account is widely accepted outside the academy. If political science has a constructive role to play outside the academy, it must surely include debunking myths and misunderstandings that shape political practice.

Shapiro’s critique is indispensable, and indeed this last point might be pushed farther. Arguably the defective accounts that issue from disengaged theorizing (whether the gross concepts of political theory or the reductive accounts of political science) affect not only our political practices, but also what lies behind those practices. The horizon of our political consciousness comes to be shaped by “myths and misunderstandings” of academic origin. Disengaged theorizing acts as a sort of unelected legislator—of opinion, and ultimately of our sensibilities.

Shapiro might be said to have renewed Kant’s project of defending practical life, including politics, from the presumptuousness of theoretical reason (an aspect of Kant’s thought forgotten by today’s Kantians in political theory). Properly understood, the realm of political practice is autonomous from academic theorizing, and statesmen ought to take their bearings from their own experience of the world. Conversely, those who study politics in a theoretical mode would do well to test their reasonings against the concerns of political actors, and see if they are intelligible from the perspective of the statesman. Anything else tends toward scholasticism.

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