Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences

A revolutionary new textbook introducing masters and doctoral students to the major research approaches and methodologies in the social sciences. Written by an outstanding set of scholars, and derived from successful course teaching, this volume will empower students to choose their own approach to research, to justify this approach and to situate it within the discipline. It addresses questions of ontology, epistemology and philosophy of social science, and proceeds to issues of methodology and research design essential for producing a good research proposal. It also introduces researchers to the main issues of debate and contention in the methodology of social sciences, identifying commonalities, historic continuities and genuine differences.

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I have lived among people of letters, who have written history without being involved in practical affairs, and among politicians, who have spent all their time making things happen, without thinking about describing them. I have always noticed that the former see general causes everywhere while the latter, living among the unconnected facts of everyday life, believe that everything must be attributed to specific incidents and that the little forces that they play in their hands must be the same as those that move the world. It is to be believed that both are mistaken.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*
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The genesis of this book lies in the early 2000s, at the European University Institute (EUI), where a number of PhD researchers started to complain about the neglect of ‘qualitative methods’. As only a minority of the faculty worked principally with quantitative methods, we had assumed that the rest were qualitative in the way that Molière’s M. Jourdain was a speaker of prose. A series of discussions and debates revealed that in most cases they were talking about something else, a specific form of epistemology rather than a method, and one whose meaning was being continually stretched across the discipline. While it was difficult to tie down exactly what was meant by ‘qualitative’, it seemed to be defined in opposition to ‘positivist’, another description that most professors found difficult to accept for themselves and which was also subject to considerable stretching.

The EUI was not alone here, for this was merely the latest expression of a Manicheanism in which social scientists seem to be driven to define themselves into opposing camps. The fact that we could never find a shared name or vocabulary for the two approaches suggested that the question was altogether more complicated. It was also apparent that most of the issues at stake were not new but echoed debates in philosophy, sociology and political science going back to classical times. Rather than succumb to the culture wars that have wracked too many social science faculties, especially in the United States, we decided to launch a debate among various schools and approaches and an exploration of the issues at stake. A minimum requirement for PhD students in the social sciences, we believe, is a familiarity with current debates and an ability to read critically a piece of work and understand its perspective, whatever its provenance. They should also be conscious of, and able to defend, the perspective they have chosen in their own work. If they criticize other perspectives, it should be from a position of knowledge. Finally, they should know how, and how far, it is possible to combine different perspectives in a coherent research design.

The result was a common first-year seminar for doctoral students in political science, sociology, international relations and political and social theory.
These students have been our most demanding critics, insisting on clarity and coherence and urging the faculty to debate with each other. If the immediate effect of the seminar was to confuse and complicate their ideas about research, we hope that at the end they have a clearer idea of where they stand, as well as an understanding that the issues at stake are perhaps fewer than first appeared. The tendency of academics to invent new concepts, to stretch old ones, to relabel others and to divide themselves into warring factions has only increased over time, and the present generation of graduate students are perhaps the victims.

It was at the suggestion of Helen Wallace, then director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the EUI, that we converted a course into a book. This forced us to think much more carefully about content and coherence, but we believe that the experience of the authors working together for two years has helped us to clarify the issues. We do not offer a single approach to social sciences, or even attempt to synthesize existing ones into a whole. The enterprise is a pluralistic one, informed by a belief that there is no single ‘best way’, and by a commitment to diversity and tolerance of different approaches. We do believe, however, that a debate among these approaches, using common standards of argumentation, is possible; and we have sought to present such a debate in these pages.

Some characteristics of the European University Institute made this debate, if not unique, more challenging. Not only is the Department of Political and Social Sciences deeply interdisciplinary, with political science, sociology, international relations and political and social theory as essential components; it is also a European institution, with PhD students coming from all EU member-states and beyond. They bring with them rich and various backgrounds, with knowledge not only of their own countries, but also of the specific contributions to the various disciplines in those countries. As a result, they constantly stimulate and challenge us to go not only beyond our own individual backgrounds, but also beyond the mainstream Anglophone social science literature. They push us to learn other languages, to read other languages and to link ideas coming from the various national traditions; and they help build, in everyday interactions, a truly transnational approach to the social sciences.

This makes our enterprise a quintessentially European one. This is not to say that there is a single European way of doing social science that might be contrasted with an American one. Exponents of rational choice, of constructivism or of historical institutionalism are much the same on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, however, there is a greater plurality of approaches.
National intellectual traditions are multiple, and there is less of a tendency for one approach to dominate at any time or in any institution. As with the European project itself, different perspectives and expectations must live together in greater or lesser harmony.

To press the analogy further, we can identify three broad attitudes to difference. There are those who are wedded to a specific approach and think that everyone should conform to it. Others have their preferred approach and would like it to prevail, but realize that this is not practical and that if there were a single approach it would perhaps not be their own; these are the pragmatic pluralists. Finally, there are those who see pluralism as positive in itself, since intellectual pluralism can enrich the experience of research by encouraging us to learn and borrow from each other. It is this last perspective that motivated us to bring together this collection. We believe that social science must never become prisoner of any orthodoxy and must continually renew itself by learning from other disciplines and from new developments, and by revisiting its own past. This is not to say that we believe that ‘anything goes’ or that researchers can mix and match any idea, approach, theory or method according to whim. Methodology is important, intellectual rigour is essential within all approaches, and clarity and consistency are vital.

We are grateful to Yves Mény, president of the EUI, for support in this project, to Sarah Tarrow for editing the contributions and to our PhD researchers for inspiration and criticism.