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2007

Review of *Culture Troubles: Politics and the
Interpretation of Meaning*, by Patrick Chabal and
Jean-Pascal Daloz

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Schram, Sanford F. Review of *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning*, by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz.
Journal of Politics 69 (2007): 251-252.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning. By Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz. (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz say they wrote this book to clarify the methodology of their previous book, *Africa Works* (Indiana University Press, 1999). The result, however, is no mere footnote to their prior study; in fact, this book is approximately twice the length the other. Instead, they have produced a theoretically rich, but still well-illustrated, overview of what they call the “cultural approach” to comparative political analysis. In the process, they articulate a stunning critique of the scientific assumptions that still pervade the field. You can sense the authors’ frustration (a word that appears more than a few times in this eloquently written book) that their colleagues in the field of comparative politics still are more often than not unable to assimilate the authors’ insistence that comparative political analysis must learn to appreciate the role cultural processes play in embedding politics in dense, if local, contexts of meaning making, thereby subverting attempts to produce trans-cultural generalizations about underlying regularities that supposedly structure politics in different societies. After a sustained explication of their cultural approach, on the very last page of this book, long after I am sure they have won over many readers who may have not been with them at the outset, the authors state: “It remains difficult to convince our peers that the fact we live in very dissimilar cultural worlds is of analytical significance.” And they immediately follow this statement with a conclusion as to why: “The problem is that our line of attack demands a drastic revision of the notion of ‘scientific’ in the social sciences. It implies that we cease to think of the attributes of mankind and of the characteristics of the body politic in purely universal terms. In other words, that we stop operating on the assumption that observable diversity is but a veil over fundamentally similar processes.” I would venture to guess that a survey of contemporary comparative political analysis today would confirm the authors’ suspicions, suggesting that the dream of science dies

hard. This book provides strong support for the proposition that this dream has become far less tenable.

By a “cultural approach,” Chabal and Daloz mean something very specific. Theirs is not a hasty shot across the bow; it is a highly refined and well-articulated disquisition on methodology—one that is consistently leavened with illuminating examples and comparisons. Drawing heavily on Clifford Geertz throughout the book, they begin by arguing for an approach that: (1) recognizes the importance of culture that makes politics and other human practices resistant to generalization across cultural systems; (2) defines culture as the dense web of meaning making that evolves among and between people situated in a particular setting; (3) stresses a semiotic approach that emphasizes decoding symbols and signs that people in a culture use to make sense of their social relations; (4) distinguishes this approach from structural and post-structural approaches so as to better keep alive a role for human agency in negotiating meaning; and (5) emphasizes that this cultural process of making meaning and assigning value is dynamic rather than static, entailing more than a reliance on insular or parochial traditions. The cultural approach does not see culture as pre-given or as an independent variable but as formative, a factor that combines with other forces (i.e., the economy, the system of rule, the social structure) to help frame the context of what is possible politically. In the process, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, Claude Levi-Strauss, and a cast of other philosophical luminaries are criticized for not fully appreciating the strengths of this particular version of interpretivism. This is a methodological treatise that makes for great reading. The intellectual fireworks explode page after page, illuminating the way to a political science that “takes culture seriously” and attends to the unique cultural milieu of particular settings.

Whether you agree with their perspective or not, you will be more than impressed by the erudition the book exudes. The authors enrich their methodological and theoretical jousting with great comparisons. As

the book turns in the fourth part to illustrating the value of the cultural approach, the authors trade on their extensive field research from prior projects to make fascinating comparisons of France, Nigeria and Sweden concerning the formation and development of the state and the practice of political representation. These comparisons are pithy but quite convincing. Just as the methods discussion rings with knowledge gleaned from deep engagement with the theoretical literature, these comparisons exhibit the insights that come with rigorous fieldwork.

While the authors are at pains to distinguish their more interpretive approach to the semiotics of culture from the more structural approach of Levi-Strauss, they do seem to share his penchant to invert established understandings so as to destabilize the readers' biases and show how culture infiltrates even, or most especially, our intellectualized attempts to compare societies. Levi-Strauss sought to show with his concept of "bricolage" that members of a particular culture who assimilated dissonant influences were much like engineers who, while they saw themselves relying on independent concepts and theories, also made their "science" fit what was possible and meaningful in their localized setting. Who was the more rational, the more scientific, was thrown into doubt by the inverted comparison. The "savage mind" included science within its mythical approach as much as the "scientific mind" included unquestioned cultural prejudices. Chabal and Daloz poignantly reveal the power of their cultural approach with similar inversions, as when they highlight the role of religious fervor in justifying the United States' War on Terror, though terrorism is said to be caused by a religious fanaticism of the enemy. The cultural approach therefore may not just lead us to rethink how to compare politics in different countries in a way that is more sensitive to how ostensibly similar practices mean very different things in different cultures, it may also lead us to look at the "other" in a way that allows "us" to better appreciate we are similarly subject to our own cultural influences—for better or worse.

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Pluralism. By William E. Connolly. (Duke University Press, 2005)

Over the past twenty years or so, William E. Connolly has compiled a richly complex and highly original theory of deep pluralism. Calling upon each of us to recognize the contestability of our most basic commitments, Connolly has sought to articulate a set of civic

virtues that can inspire a generous, progressive, and agonistic democratic culture. His latest contribution is an attempt to consolidate the core of his work into a single volume, rendering his political vision both succinct and widely accessible.

The book circles eclectically around questions of how our most basic existential commitments affect our social and political relationships. Starting with the issue of religious faith, he shows how we each, in various ways, implicitly seek to establish our faith, our source of morality, as absolutely definitive and anathematize as evil anyone or anything that falls outside its province. Faith, Connolly shows, is ubiquitous. It is embedded in and perpetuated by not only overtly held doctrinal beliefs but also embodied practices—habits, rituals, gestures. Faithful investments are thus central not only to religious fundamentalists, but to the supposedly secular work of figures like Albert Einstein, Jon Elster, and John Rawls. By attending to the deep commitments that invigorate and enliven each of us, Connolly shows how we cannot simply bracket our faithful attachments upon entry into public life. Instead of pursuing a shallow conception of liberal tolerance, we must work to make our fundamental commitments less stingy, more supple, and thus more amenable to a peaceful yet contentious coexistence in a complex global world.

In recent years, Connolly has begun to underscore the ethical and political relevance of the affective dimension of human life, and *Pluralism* continues in this vein. In separate discussions of Henri Bergson and William James, Connolly challenges the hegemony of "intellectualism" in political theory, claiming that rational analysis cannot by itself exhaust our understanding of the political. Our intellectual consciousness is always interconnected with what Connolly calls "sensibility," and much of this sensibility derives from everyday human experiences. In discussions of various topics including film, memory, the human experience of time, and our engagement with the non-human world, Connolly shows how the affective dimension is absolutely essential to a successful cultivation of the pluralist ethos.

Midway through the book we are given a short "Interlude" consisting of eighteen aphorisms selected from the broader text, from pages we have already read as well as from pages yet to come. This is a bit of performativity on Connolly's part. Connolly wants to render his ideas persuasive not only through rational argumentation but also by revealing potential sites of artistic inspiration, heterogeneous sources that do not necessarily work together in any systematic way. Like Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, *Pluralism*