Taking Explanation Seriously in Political Science

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Abstract: The concept of explanation has attracted considerable attention in the social sciences and, in particular, in political science. However, scholars are not always familiar with what explaining political phenomena means, let alone with what it entails for developing sound causal arguments. This essay introduces Craig Parsons' fourfold typology of explanation (institutional, ideational, structural, and psychological) before assessing its value for the causal analysis of political behaviour and processes. As argued, despite its limitations, his typology clearly maps the explanations in political science while helping scholars to combine them more rigorously, when needed. This is why Parsons' typology has the potential to move political scientists to the 'next level', as far as explanation is concerned.

Keywords: Causal inference; epistemology; explanation; ideas; institutions; methodology; psychology; structure; theory.

Introduction

Explanation occupies a central position within the hierarchy of tasks performed by social scientists. Indeed, a significant part of their work involves trying to explain political phenomena. However, social scientists rarely reflect upon what explanation means and how they should apply the concept in their research. The purpose of this essay is to discuss the importance of explanation within political science[1], to present a promising typology of political explanation by Craig Parsons that is based on four types of explanation, institutional, ideational, structural, and psychological, and to assess its value for the discipline.

The 'Holy Grail' of Causal Inference: What Role for Explanation?

There has recently been a surge of interest for issues of epistemology, theory and methodology in political science that may well indicate that the discipline has achieved a certain level of maturity and sophistication. Indeed, the attention of many political scientists has shifted from the study of political phenomena (i.e., 'first-order' political science) to the study of beliefs and practices of their peers with respect to politics (i.e., 'second-order' political science; on this distinction, see Stanley, 2012). As a result, the number of publications dedicated to second-order topics, for instance concepts and measurement (Daigneault, 2014; Daigneault and Jacob, 2012; Goertz, 2006), qualitative and multi-methods research (Collier and Elman, 2008) and experimental methods (Stoker, 2010), are on the rise in the discipline. A case in point of this 'second-order turn' is Robert Keohane's (2009) article, derived from a lecture he had given at the University of Sheffield and Oxford University, in which he argued that political scientists perform four kinds of task: *puzzling* (i.e., identifying 'anomalies' or problems that should warrant scientific inquiry), *conceptualizing* (i.e., defining the meaning of concepts), and generating *descriptive* and *causal inferences*. Whether descriptive or causal, an inference is a conclusion about something that is not directly observed that is derived from a set of premises and observable facts (Brady and Collier 2004, p 291; Keohane, 2009; King, Keohane and Verba, 1994; pp. 7-8).

Producing a valid causal inference is more challenging than a descriptive one: political scientists must not only show from observable data that two phenomena A and B are related, but also that A comes before B (i.e. logical priority) and that without A there would be no B (i.e., establishing the counterfactual). Because of the challenges associated with generating causal inference, and also because a good understanding of causation can help us predicting socially important phenomena (e.g., the outbreak of a war, the result of a national election), Keohane claimed that causal inference is the 'Holy Grail' of political science. However, *explanation* has no place at all in Keohane's article, which is surprising given that his earlier work (see King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, pp. 7-8; 75) was criticized for the ambiguous role played by explanation in his account of causal inference (Brady, 2008). This illustrates an unfortunate trend: the interest of political scientists in causal inference has not been matched by a similar interest in explanation.

Now, explanation has always been a fundamental goal of scientific research, even within positivist and methodologically 'orthodox' accounts (e.g., Shadish, Cook and Campbell, 2002). For instance, Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim (1948) have argued in their classic article:

> To explain the phenomena in the world of our experience, to answer the question "why?" rather than only the question "what?", is one of the foremost objectives of all social inquiry; and especially, scientific research in its various branches strives to go beyond a mere description of its subject matter by providing an explanation of the phenomena it investigates. (p. 135)

Indeed, what matters is not only to examine whether something *is* the case, for instance the so-called 'interdemocratic peace hypothesis', according to which democracies do not fight each other, but also *why* it is the case (see George and Bennett, 2004). A study that identifies a causal relationship without providing a plausible explanation is like a 'black box' (Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman, 2004). Identifying the explanatory logic and/or causal mechanisms behind a given relationship is indeed required in order to fully understand this relationship and to generalize to other settings. It is not surprising, therefore, that the concept of explanation has attracted considerable attention in social science, and in political science in particular (e.g., Berthelot, 1990; Brady and Collier, 2004; Eun, 2012; George and Bennett, 2004, chap. 7; Gerring, 2012; Imbeau, 2005; 2012; Little, 1991; van Evera, 1997).

Defining Explanation

What does explanation mean, exactly? In simple terms, 'explanatory debates are about what causes what' (Parsons, 2007, p. 11). To explain involves making a statement about why something has occurred, by contrast with how it occurred or what it is (Brady and Collier, 2004, p. 288). As Louis Imbeau argues, referring to the 'intelligibility schemes' developed by French sociologist Jean-Michel Berthelot (1990), any explanation is made of the following fundamental elements:

> ...the complexity of social relations requires not only diverse theories and methods but also diverse ways of making what we observe intelligible. Typically, we organize our empirical research according to two terms, an *explanandum* (what is to be explained) and an *explanans* (what explains), and we make what we observe intelligible by relating these two terms. There is a limited number of ways in which an *explanandum* can be related to an *explanans*. (Imbeau, 2012, p. 302; see also Hempel and Oppenheim, 1948; Little, 1991)

Naturally, there are disagreements with respect to the nature of explanation. Whereas some argue that the causal model is one among many varieties of explanation (Berthelot, 1990), others, such as Craig Parsons (2007), seem to hold the opposite view, according to which causal inferences are underpinned by a variety of explanatory logics. Proponents of both camps agree, however, on the necessity to analyze in a systematic way the logic behind the causal claims made by political scientists. To extend the scope of an enlightening metaphor by Goertz (2006), if concepts are the 'building blocks' in our theories and hypotheses, then the various explanatory logics are the 'mortar' that hold them together. To put the issue in dramatic terms, the political science building could collapse if scholars do not use good quality mortar (Daigneault, 2012).

Recognizing that 'explanation matters' is only the first step toward solidifying our substantive claims about politics. The second consists of being able to distinguish the various explanatory options that are available and use them appropriately. This is precisely what Craig Parsons (2007) seeks to achieve in what is certainly one of the most systematic, thoughtful, and convincing attempts conducted within the discipline to date. However, this typology has yet to be the object of an in-depth analysis and critical assessment that would engage the broader political science literature on explanation. We address this shortcoming in the following section.

Mapping Explanatory Claims: A Review of Parsons' Typology

Parsons (2007) argues that all of the various frameworks for organizing explanations available from the literature display significant problems. First, the explanatory options are often not organized systematically and are based on dimensions of secondary importance such as methods, levels of analysis, or disciplinary traditions. Moreover, confusion springs from the use of the same label to designate different explanations or, conversely, of multiple labels to designate the same explanation (the so-called 'Tower of Babel' problem, see Sartori, 2009[1975]). To overcome the limitations of other frameworks, Parsons develops a typology, which 'focuses on explanation of political action – relating to governance, power, and the distribution of resources – but its breakdown applies across social science and history' (2007, p. 3). Importantly, the typology focuses on action, meaning that explanatory claims must be grounded in the action of specific individuals; minimally, it must be theoretically possible to establish such a connection. Broad holist claims and evolutionary arguments are therefore outside the scope of this framework. Parsons thus espouses a 'middle ground' conception of methodological individualism. Moreover, he contends that while both within-case mechanisms and cross-case patterns play a role in explanatory claims, the former are more fundamental to explanation. Naturally, this should not be interpreted as a critique of large-N quantitative work but as a reminder that cross-case patterns cannot explain why something occurs (i.e., they do not provide an explanation per se). Coming back to the interdemocratic peace, having strong evidence to support this hypothesis does not necessarily entail that we can explain this outcome; as the old saw goes, 'correlation does not imply causation'.

Parsons' (2007) framework draws a line among four explanatory logics – structural, institutional, psychological and ideational (Figure 1) – structured around two dimensions. First, Parsons distinguishes between explanations based on rationality under constraints (i.e., a 'logic-of-position'), on one hand, and explanations based on irrationality or multiple rationalities (i.e., a 'logic-of-interpretation'), on the other. Because rationality is a constant within the logic of position, variations in the environment of individuals explain political action: this logic 'detail[s] the landscape around someone to show how an obstacle course of material or man-made constraints and incentives channels her to certain actions' (2007, p. 13). The logic-of-interpretation, by contrast, locates the explanatory power of political action within actors themselves. Indeed, it shows 'that someone arrives at an action only through one interpretation of what is possible and/or desirable' (2007, p. 13).

Second, Parsons (2007) distinguishes types of explanation on a general/particular dimension. In general claims, structural or psychological causes, which are considered exogenous, generate deterministic or probabilistic regularities that follow from exogenously given conditions (except for the dotted-line grey zone in Figure 1 that highlights the logical possibility of particularistic structural or psychological explanation). By contrast, particularistic arguments are 'man-made', that is the consequences of 'resolved contingencies', meaning that it must have been possible at some point for a different set of ideas or institutions to be in place. In other words, 'people's choices were contingent until they built their own causal dynamics around them' (p. 13). Particular claims are based on a segmented logic: while the choices made at some point are underdetermined and contingent (i.e., they could have been different), the consequences that follow from a particular 'value' on this variable 'become explicable and perhaps predictable' (p. 32). Parsons makes clear that the general-particular

dimension has nothing to do with the temporal and geographic scope of a claim or determinism (pp. 34-35). He summarizes this novel distinction in the following way:

> …the distinctiveness of particular explanations does not lie in the nature of their segments of causal logic. Any causal claim at all invokes regular expectation that reproduction of the same conditions would produce the same result. Their difference from general explanation concerns how causal segments are placed in relationship to claims about contingency. Within the basic notions of man-made institutions or ideational elements as causes there is a connotation of past contingency. It makes claims about these human creations as autonomous causes logically different from general arguments about structure or psychology as autonomous causes. (Parsons, 2007, p. 34)

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The characterization of explanatory claims in terms of the position/interpretation and general/particular dimensions, in turn, defines their nature.[1] In 'structural' claims, people's actions are explained 'as a function of their position *vis-à-vis* exogenously given "material" structures like geography, a distribution of wealth, or a distribution of physical power' (2007, p. 12). The material and exogenously given nature of structures is not necessarily inherent to their nature, but is treated as such over the temporal scope of a specific claim (p. 13). 'Institutional' claims also explain people's actions with respect to their position but 'within man-made organizations and rules (and within the "path-dependent" process implied by man-made constraints: people's choices at time t alter their own constraints at time $t + 1$)' (p. 12). For their part, 'psychological' claims explain people's actions by relying on 'cognitive, affective, or instinctual elements that organize their thinking, but see these elements as general across human kind, as hard-wired features of "how humans think"' (p. 12). Although psychological explanations stress the general character of these features, it is important to mention that differences in terms of psychological dispositions may nevertheless exist between groups of people. Finally, 'ideational' claims also explain political action based on cognitive and/or affective elements, but see those as 'created by certain historical groups of people' (p. 12).

The four types of explanations are distinct, yet compatible. In theory and in practice, when necessary (i.e., when a type of explanation taken on its own is unable to explain a specific outcome or behaviour), a given study may therefore combine various explanatory segments. Whereas Parsons does not expect scholars to check whether all types of explanation are at play in a given case, he urges them to remain open-minded: 'we must design research to speak more evenly to the evidentiary foundations of a variety of arguments' (Parsons, 2007, p. 170). However, it does not entail that a political scientist must start from scratch with every new case and examine all imaginable causal arguments, but only those that are plausible.

Assessing the Value of the Typology

Parsons (2007) has developed an elegant yet systematic typology that could help improve the rigor of political explanations. This typology increases our ability to communicate, analyze, and combine substantive claims about political action. Moreover, the presence of 'alternative' or at least 'less mainstream' types of explanations in his typology deserves praise. Parsons argues on pragmatic grounds that the two dimensions he puts forward are clear, exhaustive and help make sense of extant political science scholarship. The position/interpretation dimension, in particular, captures a fundamental distinction between two types of logic that underpin social science scholarship, even though it is sometimes hard to draw a clear line between these two logics. For instance, the identification of interests — an ambiguous concept that could either refer to preferences or basic goals individuals have or to the 'set of choices that will best realize someone's preferences in their current environment' (Parsons, 2007, p. 10) — and environmental constraints that underpin positional explanations is always dependent upon 'interpretation' in some basic sense, that is, interests are constructed (see Hay, 2011). Conversely, it is impossible to detach interpretation from the environment, as 'something' must be the object of interpretation. These remarks point to the fact that

4

interests are truly about the interface between the logic of interpretation and the logic of position (though probably closer to the latter than to the former), which leads us to reject purely materialistic understandings of interests entirely grounded in a logic of position (Béland, 2009). Yet, as opposed to what Parsons (2007) states, there is no need to discard the concept of interest altogether. Instead, political scientists should recognize that ambiguous nature of interests and the need to stress the two logics of explanation any discussion about interests must entail. This subtle understanding of interests points to the need to strike a balance between the analysis of "position" and "interpretation" in political analysis.

At an even broader level, the main contribution of this typology lies in its potential for 'enlightenment' (Weiss, 1979), namely its capacity to raise the awareness of scholars with respect to the structure of their explanatory claims. Political scientists often rely on institutionalist accounts to explain political phenomena but are less keen on other types of explanation. In that regard, assurances to the effect that political scientists should remain open to alternative explanations are not always convincing. As the old saying goes, 'if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.' By clearly laying the options available to political scientists, Parsons' framework can help us become more conscious and self-reflective thinkers (to paraphrase Giovanni Sartori, 1970).

This essay adopts a 'critical friend' perspective towards Parsons (2007) that aims at identifying weaknesses and limitations in his typology in order to improve it. A first weakness relates to the significance of the general/particular dimension which appears questionable and even misguided. The problem lies in the 'autonomous cause' logic defended by Parsons (2007) for structures and psychology. This is fallacious on two grounds. First, there is no such thing as an autonomous cause. Indeed, every cause – including structure and psychology – derives from another cause, and so on (when pushed too far, this becomes the philosophical problem of 'infinite regress'). Political scientists must establish boundaries and scope conditions for the claims they make about political action, but that does not necessarily entail that they must stop at the first material cause they encounter in their analysis. Second, there is no reason to believe that the origins of ideas and institutions are always contingent (i.e., inexplicable). Although Parsons does not state it explicitly, he seems to attribute the contingent nature of institutions and ideas to their 'human-made' nature. As for other causes, ideas and institutions may derive from deterministic or probabilistic regularities. Whereas Parsons recognizes this possibility, he argues that contingency is precisely what makes ideational and institutional claims distinctive. We argue, against Parsons, that the importance of a cause does not depend upon its autonomous nature. The 'double-standard' he sets between material and human-made causes makes no sense. In fact, the mechanistic view of causality defended by Parsons requires – or at least favours – a breakdown of the causal chain to its more constitutive elements.

Parsons (2007) is largely right to point out that structures and psychology are material/physical whereas institutions and ideas are human creations. Yet, we suggest that this distinction is significant because it entails a difference in level of 'manipulability' between types of causes as hinted, but not developed, by Parsons (2007, p. 73; on this concept, see Woodward, 2013). Human beings can help shape material structures and psychological processes, but less so than institutions and ideas, other things being equal. In our opinion, this friendly amendment helps clarify the boundary between structural/institutional and psychological/ideational claims. Indeed, while it could be a challenge to distinguish between contingent and non-contingent causes, it is much easier to establish the level of influence actors have over factors in a given context. For instance, although the market is undoubtedly a human creation (see Polanyi, 1957[1944]) that can be considered either a 'structure' – for instance when an individual actor has no influence over a competitive market – or an 'institution' – when an individual or group of individuals are able to influence its rules and outcomes.

A second limitation of Parsons' typology is the underspecified nature of the causal mechanisms that underlie ideational and psychological explanations. Whereas the mechanism that underlies structural and institutional explanations is, clearly, rationality under constraints, it is not as clear whether only one mechanism characterizes the logic-of-interpretation. The affective/cognitive and

ends/means distinctions that are used to chart ideational claims might in fact split off into distinct explanatory logics. For instance, studies conducted on the topic of knowledge use and framing have already identified a few mechanisms such as 'priming' and 'valence' that relate to cognition and attitudes (see e.g., Cox and Béland, 2013; Henry and Mark, 2003).

At the time this article is going to press, Parsons' book (2007) has already been cited more than a hundred times. Political scientists who have used the typology have not tried to apply — let alone 'test' — it in any systematic fashion. Yet, applying the framework may pose some difficulties, as Parsons recognizes:

> My first cut is [...] very abstract—or crude—in leaving much to say about how to differentiate or combine causal claims in practice. Beyond simple remarks on the evidence for each kind of causal segment, I went no further than abstract claims that the segments are ontologically and epistemologically compatible and that their demonstration usually requires interdependent claims across logics that bound and specify each other. (2007, p. 163)

Thus, the time has come to test the practical value (i.e., ease-of-use, robustness and usefulness) of this typology of explanation for political scientists, including whether the proposed amendment to the general/particular dimension to a manipulability/non-manipulability is useful. Other questions about the framework jump to mind as well: How should one adjudicate between competing lines of explanation? Is there a way to assess the 'causal weight' of a particular explanation? Are some types of explanation more important in certain settings than others or to explain certain kind of phenomena? In practice, how can one combine various explanations? Because of its in-depth focus, the case study approach is well-suited to the analysis of complex causal mechanisms and 'how' and 'why' questions (Eun, 2012; George and Bennett, 2004; Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2003).

Beyond these remarks, another avenue of research concerns the concept of interests and the need for a balanced and integrated perspective on politics that stresses the role of both 'position' and 'interpretation' in shaping the behaviour and decisions of both individual and collective actors (Béland, 2009). As suggested above, in contrast to Parsons, we shall not discard the concept of interest altogether but recast it through a systematic analysis of the interface between the logic of position and the logic of interpretation, as they can each shape political action and power relations, depending of the context. Overall, despite its limitations, Parsons' typology is a most-welcomed invitation to keep our minds open while formulating more rigorous causal models in political analysis that more social scientists should engaged with.

Conclusion

Political scientists are increasingly sensitized about the importance of the research methods they use to produce causal inferences, but this is much less true of the explanatory logics that underlie those inferences. Beyond the particular approach, framework or theory they use, scholars should pay more attention to the structure of the explanatory claims they make, which in turn requires that they are aware of the options available to them. Despite its limitations, Parsons' (2007) typology clearly and explicitly spells out those options and, as a result, has the potential to move political scientists to the 'next level' on this matter.

Notes

1. In this article, the term *political science* refers to the study of politics based on the scientific method. Naturally, there is considerable epistemological, theoretical and methodological diversity in how scholars, both within and outside the discipline, approach political phenomena. Therefore, this definition of political science must be understood inclusively. Furthermore, the arguments put forward in this essay hold for the social sciences in general (e.g., sociology, social policy).

2. When one applies Berthelot (1990) to Parsons' (2007) framework, the *explanans* is political action and the *explananda* are (to put it bluntly) structures, ideas, psychology and ideas. The intelligibility schemes that link these two elements are in fact the combination of explanatory logic (interpretation or position) and the nature of explanation (general or particular). For instance, structural explanation is characterized by a general/position intelligibility scheme.

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Figure 1. Fundamental Matrix of Explanation of Action

	General	Particular
Position	1. Structural	2. Institutional
Interpretation	4. Psychological	3. Ideational

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