Giving Hands and Feet to Morality

By Michael Neblo

If you look closely at the stone engraving that names the Social Science Research building at the University of Chicago, you can see a curious patch after the *e* in *Science*. Legend has it the patch covers an *s* that Robert Maynard Hutchins ordered stricken; there is only one social science, Hutchins insisted.

I do not know whether the legend is true, but it casts in an interesting light the late Gabriel Almond's critique of Hutchins for "losing" the Chicago school of political science.[1] Lamenting the loss, Almond tries to explain the rise of behavioral political science at Chicago and its subsequent fall into institutional neglect. Ironically, given the topic, he alights on ideographic explanations for both phenomena, locating them in the persons of Charles Merriam and Hutchins, respectively. I want to suggest some additional explanations rooted in the broader intellectual currents of the day. I would like to think that Almond might have approved of these explanations, because they illuminate why, at the end of his life, a great political scientist might return to this particular moment in the discipline's history.

> Political science did not so much "lose" the Chicago school as walk away from it.

Behavioral political science did not spring full-grown from Merriam's head. Rather, its origin owes a clear and massive debt to philosophical pragmatism, especially as represented by John Dewey, whose legacy still dominated the university's intellectual milieu at the time. Indeed, many of Merriam's and Harold Lasswell's writings in philosophically oriented journals such as *Ethics* read like conscious attempts to translate the spirit of the Progressive Era (and its intellectual articulation in the Deweyan system) into the academic study of politics. For example, in an essay redolent with Deweyan terminology and progressivist optimism, Merriam concludes:

> Government does not lag behind other competing social groups in the use of current intelligence. . . . Force, fraud, spoils, and corruption are passing phases of growth of social and political organization. . . . The combination of scientific possibilities, on the one hand, and the increasing sense of human dignity on the other, makes possible a far more intelligent form of government than ever before in history.[2]

By highlighting their debt to pragmatism and progressivism, I do not mean to diminish Merriam's and Lasswell's accomplishments, but only to situate and explain them in a way congruent with these innovators' original motivations. Merriam intended the techniques of behavioral political science to augment and more fully realize the aims of "traditional" political science—what we would now call political theory. Lasswell agreed, noting that the aim of the behavioral scientist "is nothing less than to give hands and feet to morality."[3] Lasswell's protégé, a young Gabriel Almond, went even further:

> Rather than leaving "ethics" to the philosophers (who are concerned with these problems only in a doctrinal-historical or logical sense), practical judgment of "good and evil" in the area of public policy is the special responsibility of the social scientist.[4]

While Merriam's personality might explain the particular *form* that the behavioral movement took in political science, broader forces—which also motivated similar movements in psychology, sociology, and education—were already afoot.[5]

The second half of Almond's story correctly identifies some of the characters in the Chicago school's later fall into obscurity.[6] However, Hutchins, Leo Strauss, and their followers were not merely vengeful Luddites raging against the inevitable and salutary advance of science. There was (and is) legitimate academic debate about whether Dewey's notion of "experimental intelligence," modeled on the natural sciences, can be so easily translated into ethics, politics, and the social sciences. Dewey's critics claimed that the latter add layers of interpretation, causal complexity, and normative entanglement that generate decisive disanalogies with the natural sciences. More generally, Dewey's critics argued that since he rejected ultimate foundations in epistemology and ethics, his philosophy would leave science in chaos and render democracy vulnerable to absolutist aggression from without and moral implosion from within. The nascent behavioral movement rested on this pragmatic foundation, so it too became a target.

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Today, it may be tempting to dismiss the humanistic critique as a travesty of Dewey's position.[7] However, it profoundly affected the legacy of the Chicago school, because the behavioralists' response to the humanists' challenge was not so much a defense of their pragmatic roots as a flight from them:

> The empirical political scientist . . . [now] finds it difficult and uncongenial to assume the historic burden of the political philosopher who attempted to determine, prescribe, elaborate, and employ ethical standards. . . . The behaviorally minded student of politics is prepared to describe values as empirical data; but, qua "scientist," he seeks to avoid prescription or inquiry into the grounds on which judgments of value can properly be made.[8]

Far from Almond's youthful call for *usurping* some of the historic burdens of the political philosopher, this broadly positivist view suggests that the modern social scientist should avoid them altogether. I do not wish to deny that there are good reasons for such reticence, but I want to emphasize that this position represents a major modification of behavioral political science as understood by the original Chicago school.

Thus, political science did not so much "lose" the Chicago school as walk away from it. Shorn of its distinctive philosophical commitments, the term *Chicago school* can be reduced, without much loss, to "scientific" political science—a near redundancy today. It should come as no surprise, then, that the label has fallen into disuse. Depending on one's outlook, this may not be anything to regret. Many would argue that the "scientific" approach could not have dominated the field so thoroughly without jettisoning its own philosophical baggage. Thus, the story of the Chicago school might be interesting to a historian of the discipline, but only incidentally so to a contemporary practitioner.

However, I suspect that Almond thought of the Chicago school as a legacy to be recovered and deployed, not merely as a fossil to be unearthed and regarded. His short essay involves more than indulgence in some well-earned nostalgia. Behavioralism's pragmatic roots bound it to political theory in a way that gave the former vital purpose and the latter powerful new tools for progress. As the Chicago school disintegrated, this marriage came to be characterized less by fertile partnership and more by hostility managed through mutual indifference. What seemed like a technical shift from a pragmatic epistemology to a positivist one has proved surprisingly consequential for how political science gets practiced. In this spirit, then, I claim that it is we, the inheritors of the Chicago school, as much as its enemies, who "lost" it.

Notes

1 Almond was an undergraduate at Chicago when the building was dedicated. Many years later, he specifically contradicted the idea behind Hutchins's claim: "[P]olitical science is not science in general and not social science. . . . [W]e have a limited and special responsibility for the political aspects of the social process." Almond 1966, 878.

2 Merriam 1944, 271–2. After World War II, Almond came to a less optimistic position than Merriam. See Almond 1966.

3 Lasswell 1941, 336. Lasswell's position seems to have evolved over time, so that he ended up at some distance from orthodox Deweyanism. See Lasswell 1957, a remarkable review essay.

4 Almond 1946, 292.

5 Such movements in psychology, sociology, and education are associated with William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, respectively. For a discussion of how behavioral social science follows naturally from philosophical pragmatism, see especially Mead 1956.

6 I cannot agree with Almond, though, that there is much particular animus against or neglect of the Chicago school remaining at Chicago. Sadly, I believe that its neglect is quite general throughout the field.

7 I think that it is, in fact, a travesty.

8 Dahl 1961, 771. It is important to note that Dahl was not entirely comfortable with this move. (See the rest of his article.)

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