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Round table AFSP-MOD (Groupe Méthodes, observations et données de l'AFSP) / APSA

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This round table calls for a comparative reassessment of methodology in political science. It's aim is not so much to make an inventory of existing methods than to question the different modes of validation of theories and models and their epistemological foundations, drawing from concrete case studies, research ongoing or in progress. If on each side of the Atlantic contrasted methodological traditions co-exist, their respective weight varies. The behavioural approach has for a long time dominated in the United States and rational choice theories still hold a privileged place, mostly mobilizing formal and statistical methods. In France, as shown by recent studies such as Libia Billordo's, quantitative approaches are less developed and a solid tradition of qualitative approach goes endures. But on both sides parallel evolutions are on their ways.

The « Perestroika » movement in the USA has tried to rehabilitate qualitative approaches and focus back on the subject and the meaning he or she gives to his or her actions. More recently a heated debate has started around Anne Norton's « 95 Theses on Politics, culture and Methods », very critical pamphlet denouncing the evils of quantification, the cultural ethnocentrism of large scale surveys, their naïve conception of causality and of « falsifiability ». At the same time in Europe several initiatives attempted to build bridges between qualitative and quantitative approaches, in the perspective opened by Ragin's comparative research, adapted to a small number of cases (small N). In the mean time, ethnographic methods or research interviews have experiences deep changes, concerning among others, ways of archiving and analysing such data. Debates have developed about the way to process this type of data : can one really look at them through the same lenses than quantitative data sets? What sense is there in the replication, validation, secondary analysis of qualitative data? Other debates have fed on the issue of « large scale quantitative surveys » and their actual benefit for a comparative sociology of social change : isn't the problem of the comparability of indicators a serious obstacle to such an endeavour ? What do large scale surveys and data bases (EVS, ESS, ISSP, CSES etc.) bring compared with comparative historical sociology approaches ? British historians and sociologists, such as John Goldthorpe, have heatedly debated these issues. In France, the controversy has taken more importance in the field of sociology than in Political science (see the paper of Gianluca Manzo in the *French Sociological review*) without allowing, until now a real scientific confrontation of views. This is about to change.

One sees today a renewal of methodological issues in political science. In this context, several significant initiatives have been taken: at ECPR, with the « *standing group on political methodology* » restarts a debate around methods and the creation of a new summer school « Methods and techniques », at the European Science Foundation (ESF) which encourages the learning of quantitative techniques with its program « Quantitative methods in the social sciences (QMSS), in France where Lille'Summer School has extended its range of courses to new methods (log linear models, network analysis) and in the Institutes for Political Studies (IEP) where courses of methodology are being set up as soon as the first cycle. It seems as the time has come to plan this roundtable. It will be organised in three sessions, open to all fields and subfields of political science without exception.

1. The first session will deal with the comparison between quantitative et qualitative approaches. Does the opposition between an approach centred on variables and case studies still hold ? How can one generalize from a small number of observations ? In both perspective, how can one grasp the actors' intentions and the meaning of their behaviour ? It does not necessarily mean to combine both approaches but, starting from a field work, a qualitative or quantitative research, to think about what founds the validity of the results, to centre on the methodological « recipes » which usually stay in the background. Are the recommendations of the Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, Sydney Verba trio, in their famous *Designing social inquiry*, who as soon as 1994 proposed to apply to qualitative data the epistemological principles applied to quantitative data, still up to date ? Are they likely to break the barriers between these two universes of methods and data ? Conversely, wouldn't *survey research* gain from questioning its criteria of validity and transferability, the contextual and historically situated dimension of its findings, the very notion of causality?

2. The second will focus on the ways to tackle time, historical time as well as biographic time, events and process. How can one restore the genesis, the origins of the observed behaviors and phenomena, give them back their historical width? How can one reconstruct their dynamics, by modelization or experimentations, or repeated observations via panels or de *focus groups*? What are the pros and cons of the panel technique, of cohort studies of

life stories? What do « *rolling cross section* » bring to electoral studies? What is the plus value of the socio historical approach and comparative historical sociology? The point here is to take into account recent advances in the methods of analysis of longitudinal data, processual approaches, *path dependency* approaches, through case studies as well as through *survey research*, and think about the articulation between political science and history.

3. The third one will deal with be about the spatial dimension of political phenomena. What are the context effects? How does one choose the relevant level of analysis for the observation of the studied phenomenon, and how does one combine them? How can one more concretely explore beyond the observed correlations, the actual interactions existing between individuals and their social and political environment? What are the advantages and the limitations of ecological inference? What does multi level analysis bring, combining individual survey data and aggregate data, specific to the different groups individuals belong to? In parallel with the development of multi level analyses authors such as Gary King, Chris Achen or Soren Thomsen have tried to free themselves from one of the oldest methodological tabou of political science, the tabou of inference: can one infer, from aggregate and spatial data, individual behaviours? These authors have proposed both theoretical and technical allowing, under certain conditions, to proceed to such inference, prohibited since Robinson's article on '*ecological fallacy*', published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1950. Conversely other researchers as Huckfeldt and Sprague suggest to go back to the school of Columbia tradition of *community studies*, at the micro sociological level, in order to get a better grasp of the concrete mediations linking individuals to their environment: neighbourhood networks, ordinary conversations.

All these are possible directions to be explored by the contributions to this round table, combining as much as possible French, eventually European experiences to American ones. It is not restricted to the (few) specialists of methods in the social sciences, it's intended more generally to all those who accept to have a reflexive and critical look on their research.

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