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THE UNIT OF POLITICAL ANALYSIS: OUR ARISTOTELIAN HANGOVER

INTRODUCTION

Every scholar knows that assumptions shape conclusions. In particular, students of politics know that the unit chosen for analysis has a crucial effect on what is seen and recommended. At different times and places the analytical unit has been the family, the tribe, the corporation, the individual, the group, social class, the mass (and or the elite), the nation, and even "the globe."

Debate between critics using different analytic units is often unproductive. For example, those who see a world composed of competing individuals and those who see a world of competing ethnic groups have rather different views about the need for affirmative action. Similarly, those who view the globe as an arena for competition between super-powers understand a change of regime in Angola differently from those who focus separately on nation states and the responsiveness of governments to their own populations.

Today in the U.S. most citizens think of political action as individual, and to most the fundamental political act is that of one man's casting one vote for one of two other men. In college courses, however, students are taught about reference and interest groups, political parties and global strategy. This enables them to think more like the political actors who make and carry out policy.

Sometimes it is noted that women and men participate differently in politics and government; explanations for that differential have so far been inadequate [1]. In this paper it will be argued that the failure to explain must partly be attributed to a collective Aristotelian Hangover. By this it is meant that although we often think we are thinking in terms of either individuals, groups, or classes, we in fact often slip over into thinking about the polity in terms of families. We do so principally when we think about women. The result is a mixed analysis and confused thinking. Centuries after, our thoughts too often resemble those of a morning-after.

THE ARISTOTELIAN HANGOVER

Aristotle's theory of the household is described in *The Politics* [2]. There

Aristotle argues that the *polis* is composed of villages which are composed of households which are the result of two elementary associations — that of the male and female and that of the master and slave. For Aristotle there is no smaller social or political unit than the household. There the adult male rules “naturally” over the slave, who is without the faculty of deliberation, the child who has it in a yet immature form, and the woman whose capacity “remains inconclusive.” Because the freeman, slave, wife, and child “complete one another” they have a common interest and the freeman can act appropriately for all of them in the public arena.

While today’s state has assumed certain responsibilities *vis-à-vis* children and can intervene if parents become abusive, few argue that children should act politically on their own behalf. In contrast none argue that “natural” slaves must be directed and acted for by “natural” masters. Indeed, as will be shown, U.S. political commentators are quite sensitive to the after-effects of slavery and carefully consider the different political experience of black and white citizens.

With women it is different. Discussion sometimes treats women as individuals and sometimes demonstrates how hard it is to describe them as a group. However, in both analysis and policy-making, women are often treated as members of a household — as either wives or daughters. Further, this is often done unconsciously. Aristotle lives but he is not necessarily acknowledged.

SEEING THE DATA

Data to illustrate the arguments in this essay will be drawn from Sidney Verba and Norman Nie’s *Participation in America* [3]. This volume won an American Political Science Association award as the best new book in its field; it was especially commended for its methodology. It is not a straw man.

First let us illustrate the analysts’ sensitivity to the slavery hangover (and to contemporary racism) and their insensitivity to the “Aristotelian Hangover,” (and contemporary sexism). Verba and Nie develop six measures of participation and score a variety of groups for “over” and “under” representation in political participation. They conclude that “men are somewhat over-represented in the most activist political groups but not to a very great degree,” and that is the extent of their discussion of male-female differences [4]. In contrast black-white differences are found to be both important and interesting. A full chapter is devoted to their analysis. But what did the data show? What did the tables look like which produced these conclusions?

Black-white differences on the six measures varied from 4–27%. There was a 15% average difference. Female-male differences ranged from 11 to 28% with a 19% average difference. Female-male differences were clearly greater than black-white yet the female-male data were essentially disregarded while the black-white data were carefully discussed.

MEASURING CLASS

The principle finding of Verba and Nie was that there is a “close relationship among social status, participation and (governmental) responsiveness” [5]. That is, that even in a country (the U.S.) committed to individualistic competition, social class seems to be the principle determinant of political participation. Since class or SES (socio-economic standing) is the crucial variable, its definition would seem to be of fundamental importance. Yet on investigation one finds that the measurement of SES was *not* treated as a matter of importance but as one of convention, and that convention, in fact, handled the measurement of women’s and men’s status differently.

Survey data is collected from individuals and one might assume that individuals would be assigned an SES based on their individual characteristics. Reasonable as this may sound, it is not the conventional way of doing this chore. Instead sociologists and political scientists regularly assign women an SES based (at least in part) upon either their father’s or husband’s characteristics rather than upon their own. In the study in question, for example, women are ranked according to an SES index derived from data on (1) education, (2) family income, and (3) occupation of head of household.¹ To repeat, this is not unusual. The rationale is that SES is not a measure of individual standing but a measure of social access or of offsprings’ economic potential. The assumption is that for social activities and economic prediction the family functions as a unit and that the adult male’s influence is primary [6]. However, most political action is individual action. Only individuals vote or are selected for office. It would seem appropriate, then, that political scientists consider individuals as individuals. After all, a male lawyer, a female lawyer, and the wife of a male lawyer do not enjoy equal access to political power even if they do enjoy a similar life-style and even if their children do have similar economic opportunities.² Therefore, even if one accepts conventional measures of SES as adequate for certain kinds of social analysis, one can still argue that those measures are inappropriate for the prediction of political and/or governmental participation [7].

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