CHAPTER 1

IT DEPENDS

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1 Overture

CAST of characters:

• Sivu, pseudonym for a peasant in Aurel Vlaicu (Vlaicu for short), a Transylvanian village of about 800 people living in 274 houses
• Agon, the local land commission's agronomist
• Man, the land commission's surveyor
• Conu, a member of the land commission from Vlaicu
• Katherine Verdery, American anthropologist and long-time observer of life in Vlaicu


In 1994, the Romanian government and the people of Vlaicu faced a knotty problem: how to privatize the village collective farm set up under Romania's state socialism. Before socialism, Vlaicu had maintained its own form of private property with some collective controls over land, animals, and agricultural products. That system lasted until the Russian takeover of 1940. Between then and 1959, however, Romania's socialist authorities went from organizing cooperatives to
coercing collectivization; they created both a state farm and a collective farm. In contrast to the government-owned and centrally managed state farm, Vlășcu's households acquired provisional shares of the collective farm's lands, on condition of using its facilities and producing their quotas of its crops.

Over the thirty years between 1959 and the collapse of Romanian socialism in 1989, numerous villagers whose families had previously held land left for city jobs, families that stayed in the village ceased to be, and shares in the collective farm shifted accordingly. As the new regime collapsed, villagers often claimed the land they were then working, sold it, shared it with other family members, or passed it on to heirs. In 1994, then, the land commission had to decide which rights, whose rights, and as of what date, established claims to the land now being privatized. Hence the drama, as recorded in Verdeny's field notes:

Sîva comes in and is very noisy about what terrible things he's going to do if his case isn't settled. He has a piece in Filigra, claims it must be measured. Map says it already has been—they repeat this several times. Map gets mad because people want remeasurement: "We'll never finish this job if people make us remeasure all the time!" One woman wants him to go measure in Lunca; he says, "We already did it there, if we have to go back we won't get out for two weeks." Sîva says loudly, "I don't want anything except what's mine!" He accuses Map: "Look into my eyes, you're my godfather; I'm not asking for anything except what's mine; I bought it from Gheorghe; it's next to Ana and to Constantin. If you don't give it to me, I'll ... I'll do what no one's done in all of Vlășcu." (Verdeny 2003, 127)

The village drama enacted politics as most ordinary people experience politics most of the time: not as grand clashes of political theories or institutions, but as local struggles for rights, redress, protection, and advantage in relation to local officials. Here, as elsewhere, how political processes actually work and what outcomes they produce depend heavily on the contexts in which they occur.

Property figured centrally in the Vlășcu drama, but not as the abstract property of constitutions and treaties. Sîva bought Gheorghe's plot, which neighbors those of Ana and Constantin; he wanted the authorities to record and legitimate his right to exactly that piece of land. He insisted that the surveyor and the agronomist set down the land's boundaries so that Ana and Constantin (who may well have been encroaching on Gheorghe's parcel as they plowed) would recognize where their fields ended and his began. Looking on, professional political analysts witness an encounter about which they often theorize: between state-defined rights and obligations, on one side, and local social relations, on the other.

Political analysts are not, however, simply observing the clash of two discordant principles; they are watching the continuous creation and re-creation of rights through struggle. As Verdeny (2003, 19) puts it, "I have proposed treating property as simultaneously a cultural system, a set of social relations, and an organization of power. They all come together in social processes." Verdeny reports that in reclaiming rights to collectivized property the Romanian government adopted a formal, genealogical conception of rights in land, ignoring who had actually worked various plots under socialism, who had invested care in older former proprietors, and so on. From the government's perspective, any individuals who occupied similar positions within the genealogy—two brothers, two cousins, two aunts—had equal rights to shares in privatizing property over which a household or kin group had a legal claim. That formalistic reasoning clashed with local moral codes. According to Verdeny:

Villagers, however, had not understood kinship that way; for them, it was performed. To be kin meant behaving like kin. It meant cooperating to create marriage, baptismal and death rituals; putting flowers on relatives' graves; helping out with money or other favors; and caring for the elderly (who might not even be one's parents) in exchange for inheriting their land. (Verdeny 2003, 165)

When Sîva demanded what was rightfully his, he appealed to his godfather, the local commissioner, for confirmation of his rights. He was calling on a different code from the one written into Romanian national law.

In the case at hand, Verdeny found that—to the dismay of most villagers—the actual distribution of privatized land reproduced the local hierarchy prevailing at the terminus of the socialist regime. The pyramid of land ownership ended up "with state farm directors at the top, collective farm staff below them, and village households at the bottom, holding very few resources for surviving in the new environment" (Verdeny 2003, 11). As happened widely elsewhere in the collapse of state socialist regimes, people used their knowledge of the existing system to capture their pieces of what remained (Solnick 1998). That fact offered tremendous advantages to people who had already been running factories, bureaucracies, security services, or state farms under socialism. But ordinary peasants also used memories, connections, arguments and threats as best they could.

2 Context Matters

Note the immediate importance of context. No one who imagined that privatization simply followed the laws of the market—or of the jungle—could describe or explain what actually happened. Through incessant negotiation, resources that had existed (or had come into being) under governmental control became private property. The negotiation, the character of the contested resources, the privatization process, Verdeny's collection of evidence on all these, and our own capacity to describe and explain what was going on in Vlășcu at the time all depend on local and national context.
The context immediately in question here consisted chiefly of previously established relations between villagers and a variety of state officials. But as we step back from Vilaica's local disputes toward the more general problem of relations between political power and property at large, we begin to see the relevance of other contexts: historical, institutional, cultural, demographic, technological, psychological, ideological, ontological, and epistemological. We cannot dismiss the question "What is property?" with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's famous reply: "Property is theft." As analysts of political processes, we have no choice: we must place rights to resources in context.

Property obviously does not stand alone in this regard. Political scientists' inquiries into democratization and de-democratization, civil and international war, revolution and rebellion, nationalism, ethnic mobilization, political participation, parliamentary behavior, and effective government all raise contextual questions: when, where, in what settings, on what premises, with what understandings of the processes under investigation? Valid answers to questions of this sort require serious attention to the contexts in which the crucial political processes operate.

This handbook provides a survey of relevant contexts. Against the most reductive versions of parsimony, it argues that attention to context does not clutter the description and explanation of political processes, but, on the contrary, promotes systematic knowledge. Against the most exaggerated versions of postmodernism, it argues that context and contextual effects lend themselves to systematic description and explanation, hence their proper understanding facilitates discovery of true regularities in political processes. Between those extreme positions, it examines the multiple ways in which context affects analysts' understanding of political processes, the extent and sort of evidence available concerning political processes, and the very operation of political processes. In our brief introduction to the handbook's varied discussions of these issues, we concentrate on showing the importance of systematic political knowledge of getting context right.

Here is another way of putting our main point: In response to each big question of political science, we reply "It depends." Valid answers depend on the context in which the political processes under study occur. Valid answers depend triply on context, with regard to understandings built into the questions, with regard to the evidence available for answering the questions, and with regard to the actual operation of the political processes. We take this position not as a counsel of despair, but as a beacon of hope. We pursue the hope that political processes depend on context in ways that are themselves susceptible to systematic exploration and elaboration.

The hope applies both to description and to explanation. On the side of description, political scientists make significant contributions to knowledge simply by getting things right—developing reliable means of identifying the major actors in political conflicts, clarifying where and when different sorts of electoral systems succeed or fail, verifying the factual premises of governmental doctrines, and so on.

On the side of explanation, superior cause-effect accounts of political processes not only serve the advance of political science as a discipline but also permit more accurate forecasts of the effects likely to result from a given political intervention. Better description and explanation improve both theory and practice.

We have therefore organized the handbook to show how and why a variety of contexts matter to systematic description and explanation of political processes. The contexts that we and our contributors examine range from abstractly philosophical to concretely local. Together they allow us to distinguish three classes of contextual effects:

1. On analysts' understanding of political processes.
2. On the evidence available for empirical examination of political processes.
3. On the processes themselves.

Thus an analyst's understanding of electoral campaigns derives in part from the analyst's own involvement or lack of involvement in electoral campaigns, evidence concerning electoral campaigns comes in part from campaign participants' public declarations of what they are, and electoral campaigns vary significantly in form as a function of their locations in time and space. To be sure, the three intersect: participant observation of electoral campaigns not only shapes the analyst's understanding and gives the analyst access to certain sorts of evidence other analysts can rarely acquire, but also makes the analyst a cause, however slight, of what actually happens in the election. Nevertheless, we will do well to maintain broad distinctions among the three kinds of contextual effects. The chapters that follow typically deal with one or two of them, but not all three at once.

2.1 Alternative Approaches

Although any thinking political analyst makes some allowances for context, two extreme positions on context have received surprisingly respectful attention from political scientists during recent decades: the search for general laws, and postmodern skepticism.

The Search for General Laws. On one side, we have context as noise, as interference in transmission of the signal we are searching for. In that view, we must clear away the effects of context in order to discover the true regularities in political processes. In a spirited, influential, and deftly conciliatory synthesis of quantitative and qualitative approaches to social science, Gary King, Robert S follans, and Sidney Verba begin by making multiple concessions to complexity and interpretation, but end up arguing that the final test for good social science is its identification of causal effects, defined as:
the difference between the symptomatic component of observations made when the explanatory variable takes one value and the symptomatic component of comparable observations when the explanatory variable takes another value. (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 82)

This seemingly blend claim turns out to be the thin edge of the wedge, the camel's nose under the tent, or the elephant in the room—choose your metaphor! It initiates a remarkable series of moves including the assimilation of scientific inference to the world-view contained in statistics based on the general linear model, assumption that the fundamental causes of political processes do, indeed, consist of variables, consequent rejection of mechanisms as causes, and advice for making small-N studies look more like large-N studies, all of which commit the authors more firmly to explanation as the identification of general laws that encompass particular cases.

Postmodern Skepticism. On the other side, we have concept as the very object of political analysis, the complex, elusive phenomenon we must interpret as best we can. In this second view, the first view's "regularities" become illusions experienced by political interpreters who have not yet realized that systematic knowledge is impossible and that they only think otherwise because they have fallen victim to their own immersion in a particular context. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written some of the most eloquent and influential statements of the view; indeed, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 38–40) quote Geertz's ideas as an often-cited but even more often misunderstood objection to their own approach. Here is Geertz on how law works:

Law, I have been saying, somewhat against the pretensions encoded in woodsack rhetoric, is local knowledge; local not just as to place, time, class and variety of issue, but as to context—vernacular characteristics of what happens connected to vernacular imaginations of what can. It is this complex of characteristics and imaginings, stories about events cast in imagery about principles, that I have been calling a legal sensibility. This is a doubtless more than a little vague, but as Wittgenstein, the patron saint of what is going on here, remarked, a verbal picture of an indistinct object is not after all a clear one but an indistinct one. Better to paint the sea like Turner than attempt to make it a Constable cow. (Geertz 1979, 235)

Much more fun than the "systematic component of comparable observations," Geertz's argument comes close to saying that the systematic component does not exist, and would not be worth looking for if it did. Like the King–Keohane–Verba manual, this handbook came into existence largely because political analysts steeped in Geertzian skepticism have offered serious objections to standard social scientific portrayals of political processes, but have not—sometimes on principle—systematized their knowledge of context, cultural variability, and social construction (Hacking 1999). It ends up, however, much more concerned about those objections than King, Keohane, and Verba.

Something in Between. Political scientists rarely line up in disciplined armies under the banners of General Laws and Skepticism to do open battle with each other, yet the two flags define the limits of a terrain across which political analysts regularly deploy their forces. From differing bases within the terrain, polternicians often venture out for struggle to control one piece or another of the territory. Some observers speak of choices between positivism and constructivism, between covering laws and hermeneutics, between general and local knowledge, or between reductionism and holism. Regardless of the terminology, at one end of the range we find claims for universal principles that cut across particular social contexts, at the other claims that attempt to describe and explain political phenomena have no means of escaping particular social contexts.

Certainly limiting cases exist in which each approach applies in a relatively extreme form. On the one hand, seers of General Laws can sometimes find fairly robust law-like regularities. Consider the relationship between inflation and unemployment traced by the Phillips Curve (at least the shape of that curve seems constant, even if its actual values have to be recalibrated in every period; Friedman 1957). Another might be Duverger's Law: how plurality voting rules give rise to and sustain two-party electoral systems (Riker 1962). We can also sometimes find clear cases where the acts in question are literally constituted by speech and the shared understandings embodied in it; constitution writing provides a compelling example (Sears 1966, 1995; Simon 1969, 2002; Tilly 1986). Political actors weave legal fictions like sovereignty of just such stuff (Waller 1993; Wendt 1999). Around them, distinctive "standpoints," perspectives, and discourses of different social groupings coalesce.1 If part of what exists in our world, ontologically, comes into being through these sorts of social construction, then we need an epistemology suited to understanding those mechanisms of social construction—the "how" of constructionism rather than merely the "if . . . then" of positivism, "knowing how" rather than merely "knowing that" (Ryle 1949; Foucault 1978; Rose and Miller 1992).

Although we can clearly find cases where one or the other approach captures the whole story, neither approach is likely to be enough. Archer et al. 1998; Hay 2003, ch. 3. Most of this handbook's chapters offer arguments, at least implicitly, in defense of one position within the range and against others. Readers who consult the handbook on the way to pursuing their own descriptions and explanations of political processes face the same choices. But we hope that having been duly sensitized to the effects of context, none of our readers will ever again find themselves in the position of Ashford's (1993, 20) analyst of French communal budgets [who], laboring to extend a data bank to 1871, was mystified [by the paucity of data] until someone told him of the Franco-Prussian War.

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1 See e.g. Smith 1987; Antonov and Witt 1993; Zetter 1993; Finnegam and Skidelsky 2000; Jackson 2004
2.2 Ontologies

Leaving much finer distinctions to the handbook's contributors, let us distinguish three aspects of the unavoidable choices: ontology, explanatory logic, and mechanisms. Within political science, major ontological choices concern the sorts of social entities whose coherent existence analysts can reasonably assume. Major alternatives include holism, methodological individualism, phenomenological individualism, and relational realism. Holism is the doctrine that social structures have their own self-sustaining logics. In its extreme form—once quite common in political science but now unfashionable—a whole civilization, society, or culture undergoes a life of its own. Less extreme versions attribute self-reproducing powers to major institutions, treat certain segments of society as subordinating the rest to their interests, represent dominant mentalities, traditions, values, or cultural forms as regulators of social life, or assign inherent self-reproducing logics to industrialism, capitalism, feudalism, and other distinguishable varieties of social organization.

Methodological individualism insists on human individuals as the basic or unique social reality. It not only focuses on persons, one at a time, but imputes to each person a set of intentions that cause the person's behavior. In more relativistic versions of methodological individualism, the person in question contains a utility schedule and a set of assets, which interact to generate choices within well-defined constraints. In every such methodology, to be sure, figures a market-like allocative structure that operates externally to the choice-making individual—but it is astonishing how rarely methodological individualists examine by what means those allocative structures actually do their work.

The less familiar term phenomenological individualism refers to the doctrine that individual consciousness is the primary or exclusive site of social life. Phenomenological individualism veers into solipsism when its adherents argue that adjacent minds have no access to each other's contents, thereby no observer can escape the prison of her own awareness. Even short of that analytically self-destructive position, phenomenological individualists tend to regard states of body and mind—impulses, reflexes, desires, ideas, or programs—as the chief motors of social action. In principle, they have two ways to account for large-scale political structures and processes: (1) as summed individual responses to similar situations; (2) as distributions and/or connections among individual actions.

In the first case, political scientists sometimes constitute collective actors consisting of all the individuals within a category such as peasant or woman. In the second case, they take a leaf from those political scientists who see national political life as a meeting-place, synthesis, and outcome of shifting distribution of attitudes we call public opinion or from the social psychologists who see individual X's action as providing a stimulus for individual Y's action. Even there, they hold to the conception of human consciousness as the basic site of social life.

Relational realism, the doctrine that transactions, interactions, social ties, and conversations constitute the central stuff of social life, once predominated in social science. Classical economists, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel all emphasized social relations, regarding both individuals and complex social structures as products of regularities in social relations. During the twentieth century, however, relational realism lost much of its ground to individualism and holism. Only in American pragmatism, various versions of network analysis, and some corners of organizational or labor economics did it prevail consistently. Only with the breakdown of structural Marxism has it once again come to the fore elsewhere. Relational realism concentrates on connections that concatenate, aggregate, and disaggregate readily, forming organizational structures at the same time as they shape individual behavior. Relational analysts follow flows of communication, patron-client chains, employment networks, conversational connections, and power relations from the small scale to the large and back. A case in point is the way in which democracy emerged through networks of workers forming and changing ever-changing "workers' commissions" in the interstices of the rigid, formal mechanisms of corporatist intermediation in Franco's Spain (Powers and 1984).

Intellectual genetic engineers can, of course, create hybrids of the four basic ontologies. A standard combination of phenomenological individualism and holism portrays a person in confrontation with society, each of the elements and their very confrontation having its own laws. Methodological individualists usually assume the presence of a self-regulating market or other allocative institution. Individualists vary in how much they allow for emergences—structures that result from individual actions but once in existence exert independent effects on individual actions, much as music-lovers enter a concert hall one by one, only to see the audience's distribution through the hall affect both the orchestra's performance and their own reactions to it. Relational analysts commonly allow for partly autonomous individual processes as well as strong effects on interaction by such collectively created structures as social categories and centralized organizations. Nevertheless, the four ontologies lead to rather different accounts of political processes.

They also suggest distinctive starting points for analysis. A holistic view eventually work to the individuals that live within a given system or the social relations that connect individuals with the system, but her starting point is likely to be some observation of the system as a whole. Methodological individualists can treat social tides as products of individual calculation, but above all they must specify relevant individual actors before launching their analyses. Phenomenological individualists likewise give priority to individuals, with the two qualifications that (1) their individuals are sites of consciousness rather than of calculating intentions and (2) they frequently move rapidly to shared states of awareness, at the limit attributing shared orientations to all members of a population. Relational realists may begin with existing social tides, but to be consistent and effective they should
actually start with transactions among social sites, then watch when and how transactions bundle into more durable, substantial, and/or consequential relations among sites.

2.3 Explanatory Strategies

As this book’s individual chapters illustrate amply, some of political science’s fiercest disagreements involve logic of explanation. At the risk of fierce disagreement, let us distinguish five competing positions: skepticism, law-seeking explanations, propensity analyses, systemic analyses, and mechanism-based accounts. Skepticism considers political processes to be so complex, contingent, and inextricable, or particular as to defy explanation. Short of an extreme position, however, even a skeptic can hope to describe, interpret, or assign meaning to processes that are complex, contingent, particular, and relatively inextricable. Thus, political science skeptics continue to describe, interpret, and assign meaning to the Soviet Union’s collapse without claiming to have explained that momentous process.

Law-seeking accounts consider explanation to consist of subjecting robust empirical generalizations to higher and higher-level generalizations, the most general of all standing as laws. In such accounts models are invariant, i.e. work the same in all conditions. Investigator search for necessary and sufficient conditions of stipulated outcomes; these outcomes often conceived of as “dependent variables.” Studies of co-variation among presumed causes and presumed effects therefore serve as validity tests for proposed explanations. Investigators in this tradition sometimes invoke John Stuart Mill’s (1843) Methods of Agreement, Difference, Residues, and Concomitant Variation, despite Mill’s own doubts of their applicability to human affairs. Thus, some students of democratization hope to state the general conditions under which any non-democratic policy whatsoever becomes democratic.

In contemporary political science, however, few analysts propose flat laws in the form “All Xs are Ys.” Instead, two modified versions of law-seeking explanations predominate. The first lays out a principle of variation, often stated as a probability. The proposed law often takes the form “The more X, the more Y” — for example, the higher national income the more prevalent and irreversible is democracy. In this case, the empirical demonstration often rests on identifying a partial derivative that stands up robustly to “controls” for such contextual matters as region and predominant religion. The second common version of law-seeking explanations consists instead of identifying necessary and/or sufficient conditions for some outcome such as revolution, democracy, or civil war, typically through comparison of otherwise similar positive and negative cases (Ragin 1994).

Propensity accounts consider explanation to consist of reconstructing a given actor’s state at the threshold of action, with that state variously stipulated as motivation, consciousness, need, organization, or momentum. The actors in question may be individuals, but analysts often construct propensity accounts of organizations or collective actors. Explanatory methods of choice then range from sympathetic interpretation to reductionism, psychological or otherwise. Thus, some students of contentious politics compare the experiences of different social groupings with structural adjustment in an effort to explain why some groupings resist, others suffer in silence, and still others disintegrate under pressure (Ayres 2000; Walton and Seddon 1994).

Although authors of law-seeking and propensity accounts sometimes talk of systems, systemic explanations strictly speaking consist of specifying a place for some event, structure, or process within a larger self-maintaining set of interdependent elements, showing how the event, structure, or process in question serves and/or results from interactions among the larger set of elements. Functional explanations typically qualify, since they account for the presence or persistence of some element by its functions — its positive consequences for some coherent larger set of social relations or processes. Nevertheless, systemic accounts can avoid functionalism by making more straightforward arguments about the effects of certain kinds of relations to larger systems. Thus, some students of peasant revolt explain its presence or absence by peasants’ degree of integration into society as a whole.

Mechanism-based accounts select salient features of episodes, or significant differences among episodes, and explain them by identifying within those episodes robust mechanisms of generally general scope. As compared with law-seeking, propensity, and system approaches, mechanism-based explanations aim at modest ends: selective explanation of salient features by means of partial causal analogies. Thus, some students of nationalism try relating its intensity to the extent and character of competition among ethno-entrepreneurs. In such accounts, the entrepreneurs’ competition for political constituencies becomes a central (but not exclusive or sufficient) mechanism in the generation of nationalism.

Systemic explanations still recur in international relations, where the views called “realism” generally attribute great causal efficacy to locations of individual states within the international system. Otherwise, they have lost ground in political science since the heyday of David Easton’s Political System (1953). When today’s political scientists fight about explanation, however, they generally pit law-seeking against propensity accounts, with the first often denoting the costume of Science and the second the garb of interpretation. (Nevertheless, the search for microfoundations in rational choice approaches to political science involves a deliberate attempt to locate general laws in the choice-making propensities of individuals.) Explanation by means of robust causal mechanisms has received
much less self-conscious attention from social science methodologists than have law-seeking, propensity, and systemic explanations. Let us therefore say a bit more about mechanistic explanations.

2.4 Mechanisms

Satisfactory law-seeking accounts require not only broad empirical uniformities but also mechanisms that cause those uniformities. For all its everyday employment in natural science, the term "mechanism" rarely appears in social-scientific explanations. Its rarity probably results partly from the term's disquieting suggestion that social processes operate like clockwork, but mainly from its uneasy coexistence with its explanatory competitors: skepticism, law-seeking accounts, propensity analyses, and systemic analyses.

Without much self-conscious justification, most political scientists recognize one or another of these—especially individual or group dispositions—as genuine explanations. They grow uneasy when someone identifies mechanisms as explanations. Even sympathetic analysts often distinguish between mechanisms as "how" social processes work and dispositions as "why" they work. As a practical matter, however, social scientists often refer to mechanisms as they construct partial explanations of complex structures or processes. Mechanisms often make anonymous appearances when political scientists identify parallels within classes of complex structures or processes. In the study of contentious politics, for example, analysts frequently invoke the mechanisms of brokerage and coalition formation (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). If those mechanisms appear in essentially the same form with the same small-scale consequences across a wide range of circumstances, we can call them "robust."

How will we know them when we see them? We choose a level of observation: individual thoughts, individual actions, social interactions, clusters of interactions, durable social ties, or something else. At that level of observation, we can recognize robust social mechanisms those events that:

1. Involve indistinguishably similar transfers of energy among stipulated social elements.
2. Produce indistinguishably similar rearrangements of those social elements.
3. Do so across a wide range of circumstances.

The "elements" in question may be persons, but they also include aspects of persons (e.g., their jobs), recurrent actions of persons (e.g., their amusements), transactions among persons (e.g., Internet communications between colleagues), and configurations of interaction among persons (e.g., shifting networks of friendship).

To the extent that mechanisms become uniform and universal, their identification starts to resemble a search for general laws. Yet two big differences intervene between law-seeking and mechanism-based explanations. First, practitioners of mechanistic explanation generally deny that any strong, interesting recurrences of large-scale social structures and processes occur. They therefore deny that it advances inquiry to seek law-like empirical generalizations—at whatever level of abstraction—by comparing big chunks of history. Second, while mechanisms have uniform immediate effects by definition, depending on initial conditions and combinations with other mechanisms, their aggregate, cumulative, and longer-term effects vary considerably. Thus brokerage operates uniformly by definition, always connecting at least two social sites more directly than they were previously connected. Yet the activation of brokerage does not in itself guarantee more effective coordination of action at the connected sites; that depends on initial conditions and combinations with other mechanisms.

Let us adopt a simple distinction among mechanisms, process, and episodes:

- Mechanisms form a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations.
- Processes are frequently occurring combinations or sequences of mechanisms.
- Episodes are continuous streams of social life.

Social mechanisms concatenate into social processes: combinations and sequences of mechanisms producing relatively similar effects. A process we might call identity enlargement, for example, consists of broadening and increasing uniformity in the collective answers given by some set of persons to the question, "Who are you?" Identity enlargement typically results from interaction of two mechanisms: brokerage and social appropriation—the latter activating previously existing connections among subsets of the persons in question. Thus in collective action, enlargement of relevant identities from neighborhood membership to city-wide solidarity emerges from the concatenation of brokerage with social appropriation.

Mechanisms and processes compound into episodes, bounded and connected sequences of social action. Episodes sometimes acquire social significance as such because participants or observers construct names, boundaries, and stories corresponding to them: this revolution, that emigration, and so on. More often, however, analysts chop continuous streams of social life into episodes according to conveniences of their own making, thus delineating generations, social movements, fads,
and the like. The manner in which episodes acquire shared meanings deserves close study. But we have no a priori warrant to believe that episodes grouped by similar criteria spring from similar causes. In general, analysts of mechanisms and processes begin with the opposite assumption. For them, uniformly identified episodes provide convenient frames for comparison, but with an eye to detecting crucial mechanisms and processes within them. Choice of episodes, however, crucially affects the effectiveness of such a search. It makes a large difference, for example, whether researchers distinguish generations by means of arbitrary time periods or presumably critical events.

Mechanisms, too, entail choices. A rough classification identifies three sorts of mechanisms: environmental, cognitive, and relational:

- **Environmental mechanisms** mean externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life. Words like "disappear," "enrich," "expand," and "dissolve"—applied not to actors but their settings—suggest the sorts of cause–effect relations in question.
- **Cognitive mechanisms** operate through alterations of individual and collective perception: words like "recognize," "understand," "reinterpret," and "classify" characterize such mechanisms.
- **Relational mechanisms** alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks. Words like "ally," "attack," "subordinate," and "appease" give a sense of relational mechanisms.

Here we begin to detect affinities among ontologies, explanatory strategies, and preferred mechanisms. Methodological individualists, for example, commonly adopt propensity accounts of social behavior and privilege cognitive mechanisms as they do so. Holists lean toward environmental mechanisms, as relational realists give special attention to relational mechanisms. These affinities are far from absolute, however. Many a phenomenological individualist, for example, weaves accounts in which environmental mechanisms such as social disintegration generate cognitive mechanisms having relational consequences in their turn. In principle, many permutations of ontology, explanatory strategy, and preferred mechanisms should be feasible.

Review of mechanisms identifies some peculiarities of rational choice theory's claims to constitute—or even the—general explanation of social life. Rational choice theory centers on situations of choice among relatively well-defined alternative actions with some known costs and consequences according to previously established schedules of preference. It focuses attention on mental processes, and therefore on cognitive mechanisms.

From that focus stems three problems: upstream, midstream, and downstream. Upstream, rational choice theory lacks a plausible account of how preferences, available resources, choice situations, and knowledge of consequences form or change. Midstream, the theory incorporates a dubious account of how people make decisions when they actually confront situations of choice among relatively well-defined alternative actions with more or less known costs and consequences according to previously established schedules of preference. Both observational and experimental evidence challenge the rational choice midstream account, confining its scope to very special conditions (Rahman 2003). Those special conditions rest on historically developed knowledge, preferences, practices, and institutions (Kuran 1991, 1995). They depend on context.

Downstream, the theory lacks an account of consequences, in two senses of the word. First, considering how rarely we human beings execute actions with the flair we would prefer, the theory leaves unclear what happens between a person's choice to do something and the same person's action in response to that choice. Second, considering how rarely we human beings anticipate precisely the effects of our less-than-perfect actions, it likewise remains unclear what links the theory's rationally chosen actions to concrete consequences in social life. In fact, error, unintended consequences, cumulative but relatively invisible effects, indirect effects, and environmental reverberations occur widely in social life. Any theory that fails to show how such effects of human action occur loses its claim to generality.

3 The Nature of Social Explanation

3.1 Explanatory Stories

In dealing with social life in general and political processes in particular, we face a circumstance that distinguishes most of social science from most other scientific inquiries: the prominent place of explanatory stories in social life (Ryan 1970). Explanatory stories provide simplified cause–effect accounts of puzzling, unexpected, dramatic, problematic, or exemplary events. Relying on widely available knowledge rather than technical expertise, they help make the world intelligible. They often carry an edge of justification or condemnation. They qualify as a special sort of narrative, which a standard manual on narrative defines as "the representation of an event or a series of events" (Abbott 2001, 12). This particular variety of narrative includes actors, their actions, and effects produced by those actions. The story usually gives pride of place to human actors. When the leading characters are not human—for example, when they are animals, spirits, organizations, or features of the physical environment such as storms—they still behave mostly like humans. The story they enact accordingly often conveys credit or blame.
Political science’s explanatory stories generally rely on collective agents and artifacts—states (Allison and Zelikow 1999), parties (Lawson 1990; Strom 2004), classes, societies, and corporations. They treat them as if they were unified intentional agents, with goals of their own and the capacity to pursue them, and who therefore should be held to the same standards of credit and blame. The ubiquity of explanatory stories in everyday life makes the logical slipperiness all the easier.

Of course, even natural scientists resort to explanatory stories, at least in telling their tales to lay audiences. This still has that, and then that in turn; this explains why we got excited and jumped into a higher shell; this infectious agent penetrated the cell’s membrane. And in those explanatory stories that natural scientists tell lay audiences, objects in the story are anthropomorphized and ascribed a sort of quasiagency. Sophisticated observers might balk at that way of talking about objects they know to be inanimate or with no will of their own. But couching our explanations in terms of such stories comes quite naturally in the human sciences, where we are confident that the actors are genuine agents with wills of their own, however constrained they may be in acting on them.

Aristotle’s Poetics presented one of the West’s first great analyses of explanatory stories. Speaking of tragedy, which he singled out as the noblest form of creative writing, Aristotle described the two versions of a proper plot:

Plots are either simple or complex, since the actions they represent are naturally of this twofold description. The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole, I call simple; when the change in the hero’s fortunes takes place without Peripety or Discovery, and complex, when it involves one or the other, or both. These should each of them arise out of the structure of the Plot itself, so as to be the consequence, necessary or probable, of the antecedent. There is a great difference between a thing happening proprie boc and post hoc. (Aristotle 1954, 1452a)

A “peripety” for Aristotle, was a complete reversal of a state, as when the messenger who comes to comfort Oedipus actually reveals to him the identities of his father and mother. A “discovery” was a fatal change from ignorance to knowledge, an awful or wonderful recognition of something previously concealed; in the story of Oedipus, a discovery (the messenger’s announcement) produced a peripety (Oedipus’ unmasking as a man who killed his father and bedded his mother). Aristotle caught the genius of the explanatory story: one or a few actors, a limited number of actions that cause further actions through altered states of awareness, continuity in time, an overall structure leading to some outcome or lesson.

By attributing their main effects to specific actors (even when these actors are unseen and/or divine), explanatory stories follow common rules of individual responsibility: X did it, and therefore deserves the praise or blame for what happened as a result. Their dramatic structure separates them from conventional giving of reasons: traffic was heavy, my watch stopped. I have a cold, today’s my lucky day, and so on. In fact, explanatory stories more closely resemble classical dramas. They generally maintain unity of time and place instead of jumping among temporal and geographic settings. They involve limited casts of characters whose visible actions cause all the subsequent actions and their major effects. They often have a moral. On the whole, however, they represent causal processes very badly: they radically tidy and simplify the relevant actors, actions, causes, and effects while disregarding indirect effects, environmental effects, incremental effects, errors, unanticipated consequences, and simultaneous causation (Mills 1941; Scott and Lyman 1968; Ross 1977).

Many political scientists implicitly recognize the inadequacy of explanatory stories for political phenomena by adopting formal representations whose causal logic break decisively with the logic of storytelling: multidimensional scaling, simultaneous equations, input-output tables, syntactic analyses of texts, and much more. These non-narrative models, however, prevail much more regularly in the processing of evidence than in either the initial framing of arguments or the final interpretation of results. At those two ends, explanatory stories continue to predominate.

Explanatory stories matter visibly, even vitally to our study of context. They intervene in all three sorts of contextual effects:

- Analysis’ understanding of political processes commonly takes the form of stories as teachers of formal modeling soon learn, it takes heroic efforts to produce students who do not uncomfortable cast descriptions and explanations as stories and who habitually recognize simultaneous equations or flow charts as helpful representations of political processes.
- Evidence concerning political processes arrives in the form of stories told by participants, observers, respondents, journalists, historians, or other political analysts; even survey research regularly transforms respondents’ stories into a questionnaire’s fixed alternatives.
- Storytelling frequently looms large within important political processes; just think of how nationalists, revolutionaries, and candidates for public office wield stories about who they are and what they are doing. Thus one important element of getting context right consists of identifying, describing, and explaining the operation of explanatory stories.

3.2 Other Elements of Context

Of course, other influences than the prevalence of explanatory stories produce contextual effects on our knowledge of political processes. As contributors to this volume show in detail, assumptions built into non-story models likewise deeply affect political scientists’ acquisition of knowledge. The bulk of the statistics routinely used by political scientists, for example, assume a world of linear relationships among discrete variables that in nature conform to regular distributions.
Once again the influence of those assumptions appears in all three varieties of contextual effect: shaping analysts’ understandings of how the world works, pervading the practices of data collection and measurement employed by analysts, and fitting political phenomena themselves with widely varying degrees of appropriateness (Jackson 1995; Jervis 1997; Kuran 1995, 1996).

Other contributors alert us to a quite different source of contextual effects: the fact that political structures and processes have constraining histories. Participants in revolutions emulate earlier revolutions, acquire legitimacy or illegitimacy from those earlier revolutions, and use institutions, ideas, organizations, and social relations set in place by those earlier revolutions. Electoral contexts generate laws, memories, rituals, and alliances that affect subsequent elections. Property rights gain historical force through long use even when they originate in outright predation or deceit.

Our stress on context meshes badly with the view that the ultimate aim of political science is to identify general laws of political process that cut across the details of time, place, circumstance, and previous history. Often political scientists seek to specify extremely general necessary or sufficient conditions for some phenomenon such as democracy or polarization. The specification often concerns co-variation: How X varies as a function of Y.

On that issue, we take three provisional positions (not necessarily shared by all of this Handbook’s contributors):

- First, the program of identifying simple general laws concerning political structures and processes has so far yielded meagre results. It has most likely done so not because its logical underpinnings and assumptions are fundamentally wrong but because the way politics actually works.
- Second, what strength that program of seeking simple general laws has achieved lies in its identification of empirical regularities to be explained, not in its provision or verification of explanations.
- Third, regularities certainly occur in political life, but not at the scale of whole structures and processes. Political scientists should shift their attention away from empirically grounded general laws to repeated processes, and toward efficacious causal mechanisms that operate at multiple scales but produce their aggregate effects through their concatenation, sequences, and interaction with initial conditions.

4 CONTEXT AS PIECES OF A PUZZLE

Explanatory stories are offered in response to puzzlement. Why do Southeast Asian peasants refuse to plant "wonder rice," when its average yield is so much greater?

Because the variability of yield is also greater, and peasants living at the margins of subsistence cannot afford a bad harvest in even a single year (Scott 1976). Why did Margaret Thatcher retain her popularity while presiding over a period of unprecedented economic decline? Because Britons had expected the decline to be even more severe (Alt 1975). Why did Gorbachev do so little to stop the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe? Perhaps because he was incompeent or the world was just too complicated; but more plausibly because "decisive injection" was an effective way to shed the Soviet Union’s strategically irrelevant and economically costly client states, despite the internal factions that profited from them (Anderson 2007).

As actors, when choosing our own actions, we are highly sensitive to the peculiarities of our own particular desires and the rich particulars of our own mental processes. But in trying to make sense of the social world, we tend (at least as a first approximation) to impute to others broadly the same sorts of psychology, broadly the same sorts of beliefs and desires, that we ourselves possess. Not only are we "folk psychologists" (Jackson and Pettit 1995; Pettit 1996); we are also "folk situationists," assuming (until further investigation reveals otherwise) that the context in which others are acting is broadly the same as our own.9 When that model fails to fit, we go looking for which bits are to blame. In what ways the actors, or situations, are peculiar. We "make sense" of an otherwise puzzling phenomenon by finding some special features about it which, when taken into account, allow us to assimilate that case to our standard model of how the world works (Grosfoges 2004).

Sometimes what we need to solve the puzzle is a relatively simple piece of information. To understand why politics takes the peculiar form it does in Senegal, we need to understand that the primary connotation of "demokrasi" is not so much competition as solidarity (Schaffer 1998). To understand why Kerala is so far ahead of the rest of India and indeed the whole developing world, when it comes to female literacy and related aspects of social progress (Dreze and Sen 1995), it helps to know that Kerala was historically a matrilateral society. To understand why there was so little take-up of Keynesianism in interwar France, we need to understand that there was already a rich "tradition of government measures to alleviate unemployment that went back to at least 1848... closely related to the self-understanding of the republican order in general" (Wagner 2003; see further Rosemany 1985). (The latter is one source (among many) see Gilbert and Maltby 1995) of what social psychologists know as the "fundamental attribution bias." Experimental subjects are much more likely to attribute other people’s "odd" behavior to decribable attitudes and dispositions, rather than to assume that there must have been some peculiar situational factors at work, in the absence of any particular information about those other people. When subjects are told of the particular constraints under which others "odd" behavior was generated, they are much more mixed in their judgments (Jones and Harris 1966; & Gilbert, Piliavin, and Krull 1978).
Sometimes what we need to appreciate is how the situation looks from the actor’s perspective, the actor’s “frame” or “standpoint." Other times what we need to appreciate are the options and constraints on action, structures that channeling agency (Wendt 1987; May 2002, ch. 3). Those structures themselves often represent the accretion of past practice, ways of doing things and ways of seeing things that have grown up over time, under the intentional or unintentional influence of agents who stood to benefit from those ways of doing or seeing things (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1981).

Yet other times what we have to understand is “agency gone wrong.” Sometimes the explanation is simply that intentional actors did something stupid, or something that seemed like a good idea but that backfired, perhaps because of misinformation, miscommunication, or the contrary intentions of other intentional agents. Stories couched in terms of the “unintended consequences of purposive social action” (Jéronin 1956) are very much explanatory stories with human intention at their heart. We cannot understand what “went wrong” without understanding what they were trying to do.

In the process of puzzle-solving, generalists and contextualists proceed in surprisingly similar and ultimately complementary ways. Where one starts leaves a residue, and it shapes one’s presentation at the margins. Those who start from the more formal, abstract end of the continuum couch their discussion in one language, that of technical terminology and formal representations (Bates et al. 1998a and b; Strom 2001); those who start from the more nuanced end of the continuum tend more toward “thick description” (Geertz 1973, ch. 1). But neither type of craft can do its work without at least some of the other’s kit.

Popkin’s (1979) account of peasant behavior, however “rationalist,” nonetheless needs to be firmly rooted in situational aspects of Southeast Asian peasant existence. Equally, Scott’s competing account of peasant behavior (1976), however rooted in particulars of Southeast Asian peasant culture, nevertheless must appeal to general ways of understanding the world that we too share. Contextualist narrators must be “analytical” in that minimal sense, if they are to be intelligible to us at all. Conversely, rational choice theorists must acknowledge that their approach requires a complete political anthropology and that they “must ‘soak and pounce’ and acquire much the same depth of understanding as that achieved by those who offer ‘thick’ descriptions” (Bates et al. 1996b, 658; see further Bates et al. 1998a; Peacock 1995, n.b.). In that sense, at least, the “rational choice wars” within political science seem considerably overblown, however problematic we otherwise might find the holder claims of rational-choice modelers.¹


² Key texts in that controversy are Green and Shapiro 1994; Friedmann 1995; Monee 2001.

Some advocates anxiously seek explanations that are simple in form, others ones that are general in their applicability. Concrete explanation, however, typically requires compromise. We might be able to find a valid law that is relatively simple in form (in the sense that it has few subordinate clauses), provided we confine its range of application sufficiently narrowly; alternatively, we might be able to find some valid law that is relatively general in its applicability, provided we are prepared to make it sufficiently complex by writing lots of “if” clauses into it. Naturally, if we go too far down the latter track, writing all the particulars of the case at hand into our “if” clauses, we end up not with an explanation of the phenomenon but rather with a mere redescription of the same phenomenon. That is a pointless exercise; if that is all social science can do, then it becomes intellectually redundant and socially ineffectual (Walby 1992; cf. Flyvbjerg 2001). But we must not be overly fond of Occam’s razor, either. Explanatory accounts that are too stark, providing too little insight into the actual mechanisms at work, might predict but they cannot truly explain (cf. Friedman 1995). If we want explanations that are of general applicability, then we simply must be prepared to complicate our explanations a little by indexing more to context as necessary. Any sensible social scientist should surely agree (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 20, 29–30, 104).

5 Context in Its Place

The variety of different contexts in which political action occurs is, for some, a cherished part of the rich tapestry of political life. For others bent on the pursuit of parsimonious generalizations, contextual effects subvert their ambitions toward austerity. Still, account for them they must. They can do so in either of two ways: by designing their studies in such a way as to “control for context,” in effect eliminating contextual variability in their studies; or they can try to “correct for context,” taking systematic account of how different contexts might actually matter to the phenomena under study. The latter is obviously a more ambitious strategy. But even the former requires rich contextual knowledge, if only of what contexts might matter in order to bracket them out in the research design.

5.1 Controlling for Context

Some wit described the field of study known as “American politics” as “area studies for the linguistically challenged.” It can also be a refuge for the contextually
tack-deaf. It is not as if American politics is context-free, of course. It is merely that, operating within a large internal market where broadly the same context is widely shared, context can by and large be taken for granted and pushed into the background.

Of course, even within a single country and a single period, context matters. In generalizing about The American Voter, Campbell et al. (1960, ch. 5) had to admit that farmers were different—the best predictor of their votes being, not party identification like the rest of Americans, but rather the price received for last year’s crop. So too were Southern politics different, at least in the era of the one-party South (Key 1949). And of course even in country contexts that we think we know well, we are still capable of being surprised. American political development looks very different once you notice the lingering effects there of the feudal law of masters and servants (Cren 1991; Steinfield 2003).

Still, by focusing on a country where so much of the context is familiar to both writers and readers, most of the context can remain unspoken most of the time. Comparative US state politics is often said to be a wonderful natural experiment, in that sense, in which federalism means that a few things vary while so much of the background is held constant.

Controlling for context does not mean ignoring context, though. We need to know what aspects of context might matter, to make sure that they do indeed hold constant in the situation under study. What things have to be controlled for, in order to get the limited sorts of generalizations in which social scientists such as Campbell et al. (1960) pride themselves. Well, all those that this Handbook covers: philosophical self-understandings of society, psychology, culture, history, demography, technology, and so on. As long as none of those things actually vary among the cases you are considering, then you are safe to ignore them.

Ideally, you should use that as a diagnostic checklist in advance. But you can also use it as a troubleshooting guide, after the fact. If generalizations fail you, running down that checklist might be a good place to start in trying to figure out why. Which bit of the contextual ground has shifted under your feet?

In many interesting cases, those factors are pretty well held constant. But even in single-country studies of limited duration, there are cultural differences, rooted in history, that matter. Remember V.O. Key on Southern Politics (1949). Every time we put an “urban/rural” variable into an equation predicting voting behavior we are gesturing toward a contextual factor (demographic or perhaps technological) that affects the phenomenon under study.

In cross-national and/or cross-time comparisons, especially, contextual variation always forms a large part of the explanation. Different cleavages have been frozen into different party systems, over time (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). There are different levels of technological development, different demographic divisions that are socially salient (Patterson 1975).

5.2 Correcting for Context

Where context varies, we have to take those differences into account, as systematically as possible. We do not have, and cannot realistically aspire to, any perfectly general laws telling us fully when and how each of those contextual factors will affect the life of a society. But we can aspire to “theories of the middle range” (Merton 1957) explicated in a fairly systematic way the workings of at least some of the key mechanisms. We do have have at least partial understandings of how many of these contextual effects work: theories, for example, about the “demographic transition” from high birth rates in developing countries to much lower ones, as infant mortality declines and female education increases (Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1989; Drezé and Sen 1995).

So context matters, and context often varies. But these contextual effects are not random. There are patterns to be picked out, and understood from within each distinct historical, cultural, and technological setting. That understanding itself may or may not lead itself to generalization in ways that will allow them to be fit into overarching “laws.” Sometimes it might; often it will not. But contrary to the assumptions of some extreme skeptics, there are “rules of the game” within each of those contextual milieus to which such skeptics quite rightly say our explanations need to be indexed. Skeptics are right that our generalizations need to be indexed to particular contexts; they are wrong to deny that, once those indexes are in place, we can have something that might approximate “systematic understanding” of the situation.

Besides, we do not need a completely comprehensive account of context to use it as a corrective; in this regard, contextual analysis differs fundamentally from the search for general laws. Contextualist accounts typically work by helping us get a grip on some puzzling phenomenon. The contextualist account provides one or two keys, given which someone coming to the story form the outside will say, “Of course: now I get it!” In the Vlaisca story of property rights in transition with which we began, the thing you need to realize is that in Vlaisca kinship is a social and not merely a blood relation: someone who took care of your grandmother in her old age is kin, whatever the blood tie may be. To understand how social power is exercised you need to understand both technology (Mans 1986, 1993; Wittig 1998; Waismann 1981) and ideas or strategy (Turrell 1986; Scott 1985). To understand why certain social forms are widely acceptable in one time and place but not another, you may need to understand differing social ontologies—things like “the king’s two bodies” (Kantorowicz 1957) or “the West” (Jackson 2004)—and you need to understand the way different languages code and embody them (Bernstein 1974; Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1981; Laitin 1992; Wagner 2003).
6 This Handbook

Remember the three kinds of contextual effects we are seeking to analyze:

1. On analysts' understanding of political processes.
2. On the evidence available for empirical examination of political processes.
3. On the processes themselves.

In this Handbook, we take broad views of these effects. Instead, for example, of concentrating on how local knowledge (Geertz 1983; Scott 1998) shapes understandings, evidence, and political processes, we—or, rather, our contributors—range widely across different sorts of contexts. With no grand theory of context in mind, we sought authors who in previous writings had reflected deeply and critically on contextual questions in their areas of expertise. We gave preference to authors who could help Anglophone political analysts, especially but not exclusively political scientists, take better account of context in their own work. As represented in an author's previous work, we balanced among three different configurations of expertise: (1) extensive knowledge of a certain contextual area, with no particular concentration on politics; (2) extensive knowledge of a certain set of political phenomena, with considerable sensitivity to context; (3) deliberate attempts to analyze the impact of certain kinds of contexts on knowledge of certain political phenomena.

Negotiating among these configurations, plausible distinctions among topics, substantial spread, and our own necessarily partial knowledge of relevant scholarship, we arrived at a commonsense division of contextual areas: philosophy, psychology, ideas, culture, history, place, population, technology, and general reflections. With this general plan, we recruited the best authors we could find. We end up proud of the quality and variety of specialists who accepted our invitations, and happy with the multiple ways that the book as a whole puts context on the agenda of political analysis. The book's major divisions run as follows:

- Philosophy Matters. Outside of political theory, political scientists often tremble at the injection of philosophical issues into what had seemed concrete comparisons of arguments and evidence. But so many disputes and confusions in political analysis actually pivot on epistemology, ontology, logic, and general conceptions of argument that philosophy demands its place at the contextual table. Political science could benefit from a band of philosophical ethnographers who would observe the ways that specialists in political processes make arguments, analyze evidence, and drawn inferences about causes; the section's chapters provide a foretaste of what those ethnographers would report.

- Psychology Matters. Political scientists often speak of psychological matters as "micro-foundations." We have not used that term for two reasons. First, the term itself suggests a preference for methodological individualism and analogies with economic analysis—serious presence in political science, but by no means the only regard in which psychology matters to political analysis. Second, enough political analysts employ conceptions of collective psychology (for example, collective memory) that readers deserve serious reflection on relations between individual psychological processes and those collective phenomena.

- Ideas Matter. Some readers will suppose that together philosophy and psychology exhaust the analysis of ideas as contexts for political analysis. The three topics certainly overlap. The Handbook gives ideas separate standing because so many political analysts attribute autonomous importance, influence, and histories to ideas in such diverse areas as justice, democracy, and social order, and much more. We sought authors who could make us all think about proper ways of taking ideas into account as contexts for analysts' understanding of political processes, evidence available for empirical examination of political processes, and influences on or components of the processes themselves.

- Culture Matters. Many objections to broad inferences and comparisons across political systems rest on the argument that culturally embedded ideas, relations, and practices profoundly affect the operation of superficially similar political processes. Even within the same polities, analysts sometimes object that linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional cultures differ so dramatically that all efforts to detect general political principles in those polities must fail. Instead of brushing aside such objections by pointing to empirical generalizations that do hold widely, here we contribute look seriously at culture, asking how political analysts can take it into account without abandoning the search for systematic knowledge.

- History Matters. Since one of us (Tilly) has written the introduction to this Handbook's section on history, we need not anticipate his more detailed arguments here. Suffice it to say that in all three types of contextual effects—in analysts' understanding of political processes, on the evidence available for empirical examination of political processes, and on the processes themselves—history figures significantly. We do not claim that those who fail to study history are condemned to repeat it, but we do claim that knowledge of historical context provides a means of producing more systematic knowledge of political processes.

- Place Matters. In some definitions, history as location in space and time exhausts the influence of place. Yet geographically attuned political analysts detect effects of adjacency, distance, environment, and climate that easily escape historians who deal with the same times and places. This section of the Handbook gathers analysts of political processes who have worked seriously on just such effects generally, comparatively, and/or in particular time-place settings. They provide guidance for taking place into account without succumbing entirely to the charms of localism.

- Populations Matters. The contents of this section may surprise Handbook readers. One might tune to it for inventories of demographic tools that can advance political analysis. The discipline of demography does indeed offer a number of formal techniques such as life tables and migration-stream analyses that bear directly on
political processes and suggest valuable analogies for political analysis. But we have pointed our contributors in rather a different direction: toward reflection on how population processes affect or constitute political processes. Thus they look hard at demographic change and variation as contexts for politics.

Technology Matters. In contemporary political analysis, technology often appears as a black box, a demonic force, or an enigmatic variable that somehow affects politics but does not belong to politics as such. Such a view is hard to sustain, however, when the subject is war or economic imperialism. In fact, technologies of communication, of production, of distribution, of organization, and of rule permeate political processes, and receive insufficient attention for their special properties. In this section, skilled analysts of different technologies and technological processes offer ideas on how political scientists can (and must) take technological contexts into account.

Old and New. We have deliberately avoided giving ourselves the last word about the Handbook’s subject and contents. In fact, in the Handbook’s very open-ended spirit we offer no last word at all. The final section does not contain syntheses and conclusions from the individual chapters, but more general reflections on context and political processes from two distinguished senior practitioners: David Apter and Lucian Pye. They raise old and new questions that you, our readers, can take up for yourselves. If the materials in this Handbook help you accomplish new work that takes better account of the contexts in which political processes unfold, it will have served its purpose.

References


