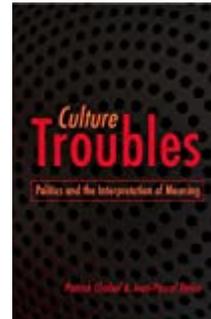




Patrick Chabal, Jean-Pascal Daloz. *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning.* London: Hurst & Co., 2006. 395 S. ISBN 978-1-85065-780-4; ISBN 978-1-85065-800-9.



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P. Chabal u.a.: Culture Troubles

The art of comparison is an essential method in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in political science. The difficulties and sometimes even pitfalls in developing appropriate designs for comparative research become obvious as soon as familiar "Western" contexts are left behind and the research is also, or exclusively, focussing on non-Western societies. Mainstream political science, i.e. the rational choice driven conventional wisdom which is still at the heart of the discipline, as the authors of this book claim, "has considered culture as a residual category" (p. 10). Comparative Politics, that is the specific sub-discipline which is concerned with the development of systematic comparisons, "as it is currently practised, at least in the West, is singularly ill-equipped to integrate cultural "variables" (p. 5). These are bold statements.

Patrick Chabal, Professor of Lusophone Studies at King's College, London, and Jean-Pascal Daloz, Chercheur at CERVL and Professor at the Institut des Études Politiques, Bordeaux, are indeed formulating a sweeping attack against the art of comparison as taught at most universities in the "West". How to define the

point of reference for comparison is the key question to which "Culture Troubles" holds a relativist and cultural but not culturalist answer: Meaningful comparison can only be based on local understandings of what is to be compared. Writing against the critique levelled against an earlier collaborative volume, "Africa Works: Disorder as political instrument" (1999), in which they tried to explain the post-colonial political evolution of the African continent by means of a cultural approach, Chabal and Daloz abandoned the common ground shared by most political scientists. In their latest book they employ an eclectic combination of historic institutionalism and insights from anthropology, which are primarily based on a fresh reading of the late Clifford Geertz. Culture is defined in a heuristic way. Accordingly, Chabal and Daloz's notion of culture refers to "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols" (p. 23), a reading of the importance of semiotics which is based on Max Weber, and "structures of meaning through which men give shape to their existence" (p. 25). Hence, culture is not seen as an abstract concept, "but [as] the code we use to make sense of our lives" (p. 155). Political processes, so the core argument of the volume, need to be

explained on their own terms âbefore they can usefully be comparedâ (p. 171). Chabal and Daloz plead for combining the analytical tasks of thinking inductively and thinking semiotically. On the one hand they call for the employment of those theories or concepts which makes sense with regard to the research question and the material produced through empirical research, and on the other they invite us to decode of what makes sense locally, and to translate this local explanation into a language which allows for comparison with other local productions of meaning. Hence, Chabal and Daloz refuse the idea of pre-existing conceptual frameworks. This approach is exemplified in three case studies on France, Sweden and Nigeria in which the authors compare the meanings of the state and political representation.

From a methodological point of view the disentanglement of culture and values, i.e. the underlying normative connotation of many comparative approaches, is an interesting suggestion, especially for those involved in what is called âarea studiesâ. However, among mainstream political scientists the reading of Chabal and Daloz most likely will only produce a lukewarm response, if at all. Too obvious is the underlying uneasiness the authors articulate about some of the axiomatic foundations of modern social science. In fact, âCulture Troublesâ is an expression of the doubt Chabal and Daloz share over the ontological basics of their own disciplines. This book is original, though certainly only a first step to develop the underlying ontological argument. In any case, it offers a stimulating perspective for those engaged in the field of comparing.

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