Holism

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Holism is the notion that all of the elements in a system, whether physical, biological, social, or political, are interconnected and therefore should be appreciated as a whole. Consequently, the meaning or function of the total system is irreducible to the meaning or function of one or more of the system's constituent elements. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle similarly states that "the whole is more than the sum of the parts." The term *holism* was coined by South African statesman and scholar Jan Smuts. Etymologically, it comes from a Greek root meaning "total," "whole," "entire," or "everything." In political thought, the idea is commonly associated with organicism, the view that the state is a living whole (the so-called "body politic") and therefore studies of its structure and functions should be treated systematically rather than piecemeal (see Plato, G. W. F. Hegel, and Henry Maine). While there are many varieties of holism, holists generally believe that the whole or system has priority to the parts or elements. As will be seen, holism has methodological, explanatory, multiculturalist, monist, antifoundationalist, and antirepresentationalist modes, and plays a prominent role in postmodernist, American pragmatist, modernization, and systems theories.

Varieties of Holism

For political scientists and political theorists, there are multiple senses of the term *holism*, reflecting diverse commitments to various philosophical traditions and methodological approaches. *Scientific holists* insist that predictions of how social and political systems behave are imperfect, regardless of how many data are collected, for the simple reason that it is impossible to hold all factors constant besides the measured variable (despite the regular qualification *ceteris paribus*). *Ontological holists* hold that social groups are existents in the same way as individuals, such that the tribe, mob, or nation has as much claim to the status of a thing as an individual artifact or organism. The social group is not simply a composite of individuals. *Methodological holism*, on the other hand, makes the same assumption, but without the strong ontological claim, and only for the purpose of inquiry. Their method of inquiry is to treat all individuals as reciprocally related and interdependent, such that the group displays independently emergent properties, rather than qualities that can be decomposed and attributed to individual members of the group. For instance, the mob is impatient and violent, even though the individuals composing it lack those traits. Methodological holism is also often referred to as *social holism*. *Philosophical holists* reject doctrines of reductionism (the whole can be explained by a single constituent part), vitalism (the whole can be understood in terms of a single living element), and mechanism (the whole can be conceived in terms of a single physical element). Some philosophical holists appeal to an alternative, the doctrine of internal relations, whereby the meaning or function of a system is defined not by its constituent parts, but by all the relations internal to the system itself (see C. S. Peirce, A. N. Whitehead, and T. H. Green). *Epistemological or confirmation holists* contend that it is unreliable to test any scientific theory by itself, since every theory depends on a web of related theories and hypotheses. Similar to scientific holists, epistemological holists believe that isolated data cannot adequately prove that a theory is correct. In addition, assessing the reliability of observational interpretations depends on a similar assessment of the operative theory. In other words, scientific observations are always theory-laden. *Complementary holists* argue that multiple "spheres" of social relations (political,

economic, and cultural) interact to determine the content of our collective experiences. Some complementary holists read Marxism as an antiholist account of collective experience in that it reduces all social relations to economic relations. Others, such as Bertell Ollman (1976), view things in the Marxian framework as place-holders for social relations, thereby imbuing Marx's economic and political thought with an ineluctably holist dimension. *Semantic or meaning holists* claim that individual words and propositions cannot be understood in isolation from the language of which they are a part. On the semantic holist's account, linguistic meaning is relational and system dependent. *Dialectical holists* understand the parts as inter-related because they partake in a single logical process. For example, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's holism does not privilege the whole over the parts; rather, the parts are related logically (or dialectically) in a way that lends internal coherence to the whole.

Holism as Methodological and Explanatory

Methodological or social holism is the view that in conducting social inquiry group qualities should be treated as emergent and irreducible. The social theorist Émile Durkheim (1964) is closely associated with methodological holism. It differs from ontological holism in that the social qualities are not treated as entities, but are postulated for the sake of inquiry. This form of holism is antireductionist, holding that facts concerning the social world (or social facts) do not decompose into facts concerning individual objects, events, and organisms. In this respect, methodological holism is the logical opposite of methodological individualism. Besides attributing properties to society as a whole, methodological holists posit social forces with causal properties capable of influencing individuals. The best example of this activity can be witnessed in theorizing undertaken by structuralists, who appreciate structures in society as having independent causal powers beyond those attributed to individuals.

Methodological holism is commonly defended on two grounds. First, if reductionism does not prove effective in a predictive model, then an alternative is to treat social wholes as if they exercised causal powers at the macrolevel. Assumptions about supervenient properties (e.g., mental events reduce to brain events) do not always produce models that yield reliable or easily calculable predictions about group behavior. The reasonable and pragmatic next step is to embrace methodological holism. Second, some political and historical forces cannot be shaped by individual agents, even though they are themselves shaped by those identical forces. Some social facts about groups and communities (e.g., linguistic conventions and ethical norms) should therefore be treated as independent of the specific brain states or behaviors of the individuals who compose them. Some postpositivist explanatory models have inherited this commitment to methodological holism. Whether a theory is effective in explaining a phenomenon depends on a prior theoretical account of the proper relationship between theories and evidence. Rather than demonstrating that the predictive hypotheses following from a theory fail and thus falsify the theory, theories must be continually revised at the margins in order to account for anomalies, at least until a preponderance of contrary evidence warrants rejection and adoption of a new theory. *Explanatory holism* clarifies the intimate relationship between theory and evidence by challenging the logical positivists' explanatory theory of falsification. Explanatory holists, such as Arthur F. Bentley (1995 [1908]: 196), also challenge the crude claim that distinctions establish "different kinds of 'things' … [for the inquirer] do[es] not get in them different parts of a machine; but instead, different phases of a process."

Holism as Muticulturalist and Monist

Outside of methodological and explanatory modeling, holism has also influenced political thinking about multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is the notion that political concepts such as democracy, liberalism, and citizenship

should reflect ideals of cultural diversity and tolerant inclusiveness. Multiculturalists acknowledge that traditional ideals of equality, autonomy, and liberty can impose burdens of misrecognition, marginalization, and exclusion on minority groups in liberal societies. To meet this challenge, Charles Taylor (1992) proposes a form of ontological holism, whereby social goods such as group rights, cultural identities, and language differences receive equal recognition and protection by majority-formed governments. Rather than appealing to the majority's capacity for sympathy (or empathy), Taylor bases his argument for a "politics of recognition" on holism. If these goods are "irreducibly social," then they cannot be decomposed into individual rights or entitlements, and so the majority must recognize them as having comparable value and deserving reasonable accommodation (see Will Kymlicka).

In spite of its association with multiculturalism, holism is also closely connected with the antipluralist position known as monism. Monism in its most general sense means that there is unity to all of an individual's beliefs, such that truth is that which is coherent with the individual's belief system. On a macrolevel, monism signifies that a whole community or society must subscribe to a single comprehensive doctrine (or worldview) of what is true, right, and good. Benedict de Spinoza's argument in the *Ethics* exemplifies the concept of monism. Since all is *God*, everything in the cosmos relates through its divinity; so, humans must strive to understand their purpose in light of a plan much larger (and more godly) than themselves. Monism is clearly at odds with pluralism or the view that a well-ordered political community should accommodate a multiplicity of reasonable belief systems, even setting aside metaphysical questions for the sake of consensus on a set of core political beliefs (see Rawls). Arguing for pluralism, Isaiah Berlin (1998: 1) contends that state-sponsored monism leads to authoritarian rule:

> The enemy of pluralism is monism – the ancient belief that there is a single harmony of truth into which everything, if it is genuine, in the end must fit. The consequence of this belief … is that those who know should command those who do not.

Holism in its multiculturalist and monist modes is practically and conceptually in tension, for multiculturalists invite a tolerant and inclusive politics, while monists insist on a repressive and closed political community featuring a singular worldview.

Holism as Antifoundationalist and Antirepresentationalist

Semantic or meaning holism also finds expression in antifoundationalist and antirepresentationalist political epistemologies. According to the antifoundationalist, knowledge claims are never apodictically certain. More radical epistemological positions deny that there exist any rational or empirical grounds for true belief whatsoever. If foundations are metaphoric turtles, so the antifoundationalist story goes, a critical approach to studying politics would assume that justification involves turtles all the way down. There are, in other words, no absolute or final foundations to our knowledge of the world. Instead, warranting any epistemological claim is about searching for congruity or coherence of a truth claim within a wider web of beliefs (see Willard Van Orman Quine). Antirepresentationalists reject the notion that knowledge is the result of correspondence between sensory-cognitive content (e.g., sensations, sense data, ideas, or concepts) and object in the world. Antifoundationalism and antirepresentationalism mirror meaning holism. Similar to the relationship between truth claims and foundations or sensory-cognitive content and objects, the relationship between words and objects is never a matter of one-to-one justification or correspondence. Rather, meaning is constructed as part of a whole language system or constituted within a broader process of discourse. Postmodernists and pragmatists are commonly antifoundationalist and antirepresentationalist in this holistic sense (see Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and John Dewey; see next section).

In political thought, the antifoundationalist and antirepresentationalist dimensions of holism can take several guises, including antireductionism, antipositivism, historicism, and constructivism. Since beliefs can only be justified by determining whether they cohere within a broader doxastic web, explanations of political actions cannot be reduced to a single set of "objective" facts. Instead, a holistic explanation must tie together all the relevant beliefs, cultural artifacts, social conditions, and competing discourses into a meaningful account of the political event or situation. In contrast to positivism's assumption of a strict fact-value dichotomy, antifoundationalist holists presume that facts are value-laden and values are fact-laden. Neither objective facts nor privileged values afford a God's-eye perspective or Archimedean point of reference in conducting political inquiry. Antirepresentationalist holists are often historicists, denying any direct correspondence between historical truth and some past state of affairs. Rather, history is constantly remade or reconstructed in order to reflect current needs, values, interests, and beliefs.

Finally, antifoundational holism closely aligns with social constructivism, or the view that the social world is built up through human concepts, beliefs, conventions, phobias, and even stereotypes. In critical approaches to the study of political phenomena, notions that have become essentialized or reified as ahistorical causal forces (e.g., hegemonic power, class warfare, and transcendental reason) are deconstructed or unmasked, revealing their roots in historically contingent discourses, genealogies, and local (as opposed to meta)narratives.

Holism in Postmodernist and Pragmatist Political Theories

Postmodernists and American pragmatists have recognized the value of holist ideas, especially those related to antifoundationalism and antirepresentationalism, and incorporated them into their political philosophies. As its namesake suggests, postmodernism signals the eclipse of modern thought by ideas more suited to the age: subjectivism, antiessentialism, rejection of grand metanarratives, reflexive critique of social practices, as well as a utopian view of contemporary politics. Most postmodernists criticize the foundationalism of René Descartes' epistemology, opting instead for a sociological understanding of knowledge production. Spurning the legacy of the Enlightenment, most postmodernists oppose universal and trans-historical truth claims – for instance, to the existence of universal human rights – and insist that such claims be understood genealogically, or in terms of how the subject is historically constituted (see Michel Foucault). The holist perspective of some postmodernists is most evident in a faith that individuals find meaning in politics by appreciating the whole of their cultural and discursive practices (sometimes with an ironic attitude), rather than reducing meaning to word–object correspondence or scientific explanation. Other postmodernists are not as easily classified as holists, for they emphasize difference, dissonance, and deconstruction, not system and incorporation, in our linguistic practices (see Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida). In this way, their postmodernist account of meaning is fundamentally pluralist, not monist.

US pragmatists have also adopted the theme of holism into their philosophical commitments and their general approach to political inquiry as well as democracy. Pragmatists old and new embrace antifoundationalism, antirepresentationalism, fallibilism, historicism, and a faith that reliable theories and concepts should stand the test of experience (scientific inquiry) or discourse (deliberative democracy). Among the three major thinkers representing classical pragmatism (Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey), Dewey explicitly extended his philosophical views into the realm of political theory. Holism is a feature of Dewey's theory of inquiry, especially in his characterization of a situation as a single qualitative whole prior to the onset of a problem. Democracy for Dewey resembled a "way of life," a method for cultivating individual

and collective capacities through communication, deliberation, and self-governance, more than a distinct set of political institutions. When confronted with a social or political difficulty, deliberating citizens seek to restore equilibrium to the situation, to make it whole again, by resolving the problem at hand. Some neopragmatists argue for a postphilosophical account of democracy, one that eases suffering, extends freedom, and promotes solidarity (a kind of social holism) among members of liberal political communities (see Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, and Cornell West). Although the theories of classical and neopragmatists do not agree in every respect, they do share a core commitment to holism.

Holism in Modernization and Systems Theories

Besides postmodernist and pragmatist theories, holism also features strongly in modernization and systems theories. *Functional holism* is the view that a rational account of multiple causal forces, individual and collective, acting on a system can yield not only accurate predictions of future states, but also suggestions for how to improve the system's processes. Adopting a functional holist outlook, modernization theorists proposed a systematic method for studying and accelerating state development in the 1950s and 1960s (see Gabriel Almond, Marion Levy, Talcott Parsons, and Edward Shils). Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (1951) offered the most definitive framework for modernization theory, conceiving societies as groups of integrated systems (and subsystems). Depending on the patterns of behavior within those systems, a society could be termed either "traditional" or "modern," so that economic development marked the transition from the former to the latter. The underlying assumption of the modernization theory was that economic development inevitably strengthened political institutions, thus giving rise to a parallel process of political development.

Functional holism was also prominent in systems theory, a behaviorist model for how political systems accommodate various inputs and outputs through the government's policy agenda. David Easton (1965) developed systems theory as a step-by-step process resembling holistic models in communications theory and cybernetics: (1) alterations in the environment external to the system place "demands" or "supports" for existing governmental policies; (2) within the political system's "black box," policy-makers compete for ideas and resources in order to either redefine or reaffirm the extant policy agenda; (3) "decisions" and "actions" are produced as outcomes of the policy process; and (4) the redefined and reaffirmed policy agenda is affected by the external environment, resulting in a feedback loop and new demands and supports being placed on the system. The advent of Easton's holistic systems theory is one of the defining moments of the behavioralist revolution, the movement to transform the study of politics into a true science. Although many commentators have interpreted systems theory as a mechanistic model, Easton intended that it would be an organic vision of politics. A political system's external environment presents a constantly changing set of variables, not a set of factors in a state of perfect equilibrium (contra institutionalism). In the policy-making process, agents in political systems, not unlike organisms in biological systems, must adjust, adapt, and grow when faced with a multitude of threats and opportunities. Rather than analyze politics into its elements, tiers, or levels, Easton sought to understand political activity as a whole through the lens of the systems model. In this way, the holism and organicism in systems theory, as in many areas of political thought, coincide.

SEE ALSO: Diversity; Easton, David (1917–); Epistemology; Foundationalism; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770–1831); Multiculturalism; Plato (429–347 BCE); Postmodernism; Pragmatism; Spinoza, Benedict de (1632–77)

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