

Whom is political science for?

Andrea Theocharis
-University of Mar-
burg
Marcus Graetsch
-University of War-
wick

Abstract

We all study political science, but - what do we actually do here anyway?

This essay expresses our thoughts about our subject. The everyday life in University doesn't seem to give enough space for questioning what is this all about? Maybe a debate on that issue does not exist extensively because of fears of the loss of entitlement. The aim of this essay is to support the heightening of student's awareness about the status quo of research and teaching in political science as we can judge it from our modest experiences. Trying to get to the basis of such a problem is not easy. The things here written are surely not the state of the art, but they could shine a better light on the problem what had been called the 'politics of political science' in an earlier Internet discussion on the IAPSS-website. This paper should be understood as a start for a discussion, where we all can express our surely different experiences and ideas.

Since we have often been told to be one of the *elites of tomorrow* or even "future leaders" (e.g. on

IAPSS –Conferences in Oslo and Debrecen, on NMUN in New York), our self- reflection is directed at our possible future responsibility. A survey of our national association for political science students showed that many students entering the university pursue a career in the media business. For them, the reason to study political science is to become a journalist. Many other polsci-students want to work in International Organisations. Both ideas can be linked to something like having an influence on the public or even having a leadership function in a contemporary society, with a growing awareness of the international sphere. The word "Globalisation", whatever the differences of its definitions may be, puts the development in a nutshell.

So we asked ourselves: What do we actually learn? And

what does it may cause? For whom and how do we act, through learning specific ideas and later promoting them, may it as journalists who contribute to spread ideas or may it as bureaucrats who negotiate, govern or manage parts of public life?

Let the ideas flourish

It is obvious that we learn from our social environment and especially from the scientific community of political science of today, of which we are already a part. Hence one has to keep in mind that this learning has an influence on political behavior. According to Peter L.Berger and Thomas Luckmann most people develop views and ideas which reflect closely the social and political circumstances that surround them. This 'sociology of knowledge' causes us to believe certain things and even convinces us that those things are objectively true (Berger/Luckmann,



LUISS University, Rome

1967, esp. pp.1-19). Since we are concerned about the contemporary situation of our planet and being aware of our future responsibility, it seems quite important to us to look at the current situation of political science in our universities and as far as we can value it also outside. To bring the spotlight towards the right direction we could ask 'how is the situation of political science' but we believe that doesn't go into it deep enough. Inspired by the claim of the international relations critical theorist Robert W. Cox 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox et.al., 1996 [1981], p. 87) we asked us: For whom is political science?

Since the goal of every science is to produce knowledge and knowledge means power, we asked ourselves

concerning political science: *For whom is this power?* *

According to Habermas, research in science is of all kind always related to a specific interest. Different interests are possible. Habermas distinguished between a technical-instrumental interest on learning, which enables humans to extend control over nature. Secondly a moral-practical interest through which humans learn how to achieve more consensual social relations. Thirdly an emancipatory interest which should lead to identification and eradication of unnecessary confinements and constrains (See Ashley, 1981, p. 233-234). Out of these interests deriving, through research of scholars, theories.

Contemporary political science research and teaching can be characterised by the dominance of positivistic approaches. Positivistic means, by doing research where



there is a belief in the unity of science, i.e. were the same methodologies apply in both the scientific and non-scientific world. These methodologies were used by Newton for the natural sciences and introduced by Comte and others to social sciences. The belief is that there is a possible distinction between facts and values, with facts being neutral between different theories. It also assumed that the social world, like the natural one, has regularities, and that these can be 'discovered' by our theories in much the same way as scientist do by looking for regularities in nature. Another assumption is that the way to determine the truth of statements is able by appealing to these neutral facts.

As political science students we are confronted often with this approach circumscribed with the term empirical analysis. Because of the dominance of positivistic theories that favor empirical-analytical research often every other approach is seen as unscientific.

In Habermas distinction these empirical-analytical approach has an interest to control nature, or for political scientist more relevant society. Related to our question for whom political science is the answer gives a heavy weight on this group of people who want to control society. Important to mention is that the question of what is the common good for the society stands in the background, if it is not fully neglected.

Once upon a time political science asked for "good government" but more and more the question transformed into that of "effective government". And we as students,

we get "hammered-in" all these methods how to control society effectively. How to measure income inequality, what effects does inequality have? Use of mathematical methods here and there and you became an expert. Use the Gini coefficient, make a regression analysis, do clustering. Sort humans AND their behavior into numbers and try to understand reality through these mathematical methods. And if you understand how to change income inequality then you can give a policy expert tip towards your government or whatever. You can tell them which screw they have to turn and how much to give the lower quintile (another nice word which separated humans from each other) exactly that income they need to keep them in silent.

It is all about how do we achieve this and how do we achieve that. We do not take our time and the departments of today lesser focus to set up lectures, which are concerned with the question why are we doing all this? Why do "big questions" – ethical or morally formulations of questions have less and less space in the political science community?

Recently in the American Political Science Association there started a revolt. Mr. Perestroika and other were not satisfied with the democratic situation in the association. One has to melt this away on ones tongue, the Association of a subject which is strongly related to democracy in a country which is called to be the most democratic in the world, this Association has a lack in - democracy.

One could think that this is a nice cartoon or comedy story, but it is real: "The Association never entertained the wildly radical notion of conducting internal elections. What rules is a cozy arrangement whereby a committee chosen by the president nominates its successor members who picks the next governing council who pick the next president, and so on." (Jacobsen, 2001). Are all these 'experts' of democracy not able to live it through their own association? Or is that on purpose? What seems clear is that in the open society the association of a subject, which is concerned with exactly this society, is closed.

Anyway the furthermore interesting thing is that under the "governments" of this association the main journal, the widely read and heavy important American Political Science Review, is suspiciously biased with articles which use the rational choice theory as starting point of research. "Rational choice theory derives from neo-classical economics, which ambitious political scientists notice grabs lots of Nobel Prizes. The theory deploys a set of assumptions about behavior that boil down complicated lives and societies to prioritized "rational" choices in any given situation. In short, political science is sancti-

Endnotes:

* The power/ knowledge distinction is elaborated in Michel Foucaults 'Truth and Power', in: Michel Foucault, 'Power/Knowledge', 1980, New York and London, pp. 109-133

fyng a chalkboard universe inhabited by "Homo economicus," which, in the name of utility maximization, tries to erase all trace of culture, history, personality or any quirky quality that might smudge the one size fits all model." (Jacobson, 2001). Basically one could say we leave the social out of our science. Humans become a heartless, computer-like rational decision-maker. How could one expect to reach a "good society" in a world, which is full of such zombies?

The hope here is that the struggle of the Perestroika movement themes to take fruits. But the awareness of such a problem cannot be overemphasized. If we as students are not aware that these humanly constructed regimes of truth is nothing more than a construction, one runs in danger to take science of that way for granted. Follow your rational choice leader, do as he/she does and everything is fine could led to a regime of truth which has totalitarian aspects.

Social science should and must live through pluralism. And any teacher of those subjects should be aware of his/her responsibility. They should not drop, systematically or not, other ideas of how to understand the world under the table. Students should have the offer of diverse ideas; they should make their own judgements of which theoretical approach serves MY interest and which not. If a single department or even a single teacher does not take this into account than the danger is there that students, through the mechanisms of the sociology of knowledge stated above, adapt to uncritical ideas which 'govern the universe'.

The Political Science Students Association could take the post-autistic student movement in France and elsewhere as a good example for fighting against the dictatorship of reason reflected through mathematical oversimplifications **. But we not only should be concerned about those number games; also the underestimation of other research ideas should bother us.

Critical theoretical and all the post-modern ideas like for example post-structuralism, feminism have their right to become taught to us. We are the people who should decide what we want to use and what not. Every other teaching methods is undemocratic in the end.

critical theoretical and all the post-modern ideas like for example post-structuralism, feminism have their right to become taught to us. We are the people who should decide what we want to use and what not. Every other teaching methods is undemocratic in the end.

Something to hide?

Although *power* is a main subject in the field of pol-sci, it seems to us that today power is analyzed insufficiently. Important structures of power are maybe intentionally or unintentionally not taken into consideration of political science analyses.

Structures of power have an influence on every dimension of human relations but the majority of political science analyses are state-centered. What about for example

psychological ties that have a determining influence on all social relations? Since "soul economy" can be influenced by every political and economical development, political psychology needs to be an integral part of research and curriculum in order to understand political events.

The situation described above, repressing some ideas, is also heavily related to power. Specific ideas could lead through practice to specific power relationships. Regimes of truth decide what is right or wrong, they could lead to the fact that for example a dictatorship is taking for granted within a society because, the members of the society do not have the other ideas, which dismisses dictatorship.

What has this to do with political science? Surely the impact of ideology is and was of concern in political science research. But one could say that contemporary student at universities simply do not learn enough of that impact.

Let's take for example the political field of economic policy. Is not this field related to specific economical ideas of key thinkers in economy?

A political decision-maker is guided exactly towards those ideas which decision they should make to achieve this or that result. But if one looks at contemporary teaching of those economic ideas one could think their seems to be only one idea and that it is true. Nearly every economic first year textbook seems really to promote only specific ideas. But not all which became developed throughout economic research. You find for example nearly nowhere the ideas of Silvio Gesell who developed ideas of a 'Free Economy' which is a critical examination of the monetary system*.

Even more and more the ideas of Marx went into the trashbin. But should a textbook which is used in so called 'open societies' simply underestimate even any idea, although there is no proof that everything of those ideas are wrong? And what exactly should that mean for the power relations if the future decision-makers simple only reflect and use what they got taught at the university? How open are those societies really? And in whose interest could this happen?

Another example of underestimated power relations is also related to the production of ideas. Gabriel A. Almond is well known to nearly every third year political science student.

His and Co-authors Sidney Verbas, 'Civic Culture' is quite popular. The research findings are chewed through in the early years of studying political science. Their methods became state of the art. But the knowledge



Endnotes:

* The 'post-autistic economics network' website: <http://www.paecon.net/>

** See Werner Onken's short paper: 'A Market Economy without Capitalism' for an introduction to Gesell ideas: <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~roehrigw/onken/engl.htm>

which has been produced in the name of “objective”

science, which is concerned only to elaborate the truth and nothing but the truth, is under suspicion to serve in the first place the national security agency and/or the government. ‘His scholarship tracked US foreign policy concerns, and it was part of a broader Cold War cultural formation. ‘Political culture’, thus, was not pure of the politics of national security.’ (Oren, 2000, p. 543)

One could ask, what about all the fuzz? Well it is not the problem that it is a work for and maybe indirectly by the national security agency which is of concern, but more that it is not explicitly said that it is. A student and a scholar could make other judgements about research, if it is clear in whose interest it is made. Simple hiding it seems unscientific. Surely stating it does not necessarily lead to solve all those problems, for example we do not get the information which research is not made after the rejection of funding or whatever. Why do for example the American political scientists do not cover the important problem of racism in their country seriously enough? * Or why is the process of German unification nearly uncovered as if it is not of importance?

Where is the action?

John F. Kennedy once said that he runs for president because there is where the action is. With action he surely meant power. So the political science community research a lot about the American presidency. The impact of parties, trade unions, business unions, social movements, think tanks, foreign governments and so on are all elaborated. But do we really take everything into consideration? What is the real impact of the several ‘discussion councils’ for foreign policy making like the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States the Royal Institute of International Affairs in the United Kingdom or the German society for foreign policy?

What is the effect of the meetings in the Mont Pelerin Society and the Bilderberg

group? Do they drink tea and play golf and have only chitchat about the world like any group of political science students in pubs? Or do they *make* politics there, is there the action?

If those things aren’t covered by anybody within the scientific community and only by a bunch of extremists in the outside than this is questionable.

Helo, helo - is there a world out there?

One of the main characteristics of pol-sci is that a quite little of its output reaches the public. Is the public really not interested in the results or can we find the reasons inside the working method of the scientific community?

If that is so, what leads to the building of the so-called “Ivory Tower” where the knowledge power is isolated?

In 1968 the Otto-Suhr-Department of political science of the Free University in Berlin agreed on new statutes, which stated: “The department – examines in research and teaching the shaping and structure of public life under empirical-analytical and normative aspects with a variety of scientific methods; because of that, it elaborates conditions for the broadening of freedom and self-determination in all areas of society.” This can be labeled as a democratization agreement.

In reality, democracy has always been a subject of political science that has mainly been defended; but quite seldom it has been seen as a goal that still has to be reached and really worked on in the Western World.

But let’s get back to the “Ivory Tower”. Somehow scientists tend to create their own language, their political science jargon, which ensures them to appear scientific. This leads to exclusion and at least in Germany to the “worship of the incomprehensible”. In the end, scientists write for scientists only and then science degenerates into an end in itself.

Lets take for example what an editor of the Political Quarterly Tony Wriqth wrote about bad language: “Here is one example, typically of many others, from a political scientists: ‘It is possible to offer a discussion of the ‘Pacific Asian model’ in terms which gesture to an ideal-typical political-economic configuration, related to social-institutional structures, and associated cultural forms.’ Is anybody supposed to read this kind of stuff? Academics are writing more and more about less and less, and in a mutilated language that cuts them off from the public arena. Is it because they really have nothing to say, or because – even if they had – they have forgotten how to say it?” (Wright, 2001).

The task of an emancipatory science can not be limited to university. If the democratization- task of our subject is

taken serious, political science needs to have broader demands to itself. The political scientist Harald May once said: “Parliamentarianism without feedback in society is Oligarchy.” What about science then? One can then say: Science without feedback in society is oligarchy of knowledge.

But the use of language is also in other ways important. In social sciences we very often make definitions of specific concepts. The purpose to do this is to make things easier instead of saying for example “a person who is enrolled in a university for eductaion” someone says just “student”. If someone would talk about these unwashed



Endnotes:

* Thank Mr. Ido Oren for that tip

persons then the word 'student' simply replaces the whole fragment. Concepts we often use in political science are for example 'leadership', 'authority', 'sovereignty', 'power' and so on. Many of these concepts are well known in the public opinion but others are not. Who knows what a concordance democracy is, or even a consensus democracy? But the main problem is if we take concepts just for granted, without taking them under critical investigation. Take for example the concept of the Gross Domestic Product, what does this number really measure? We use it to talk about the wealth of nations, how it develops, in what conditions the economy is and so on? But do we also relate it to the whole society of that country? We compare the GDP numbers of different countries, but do both numbers really are came in the same way about? Aren't their different national techniques to count them? And if so is that still comparable?

It is said that GDP reflects the wealth of a nation state. Wealth has to do with well being; therefore it is said that GDP reflects the well being of ... yeah the well being of what exactly? The economy, the whole society or what? If you drove with a car on the pedestrian walk and causes that one human has to sit in future in a wheel chair, that will increase the GDP. But did you really increase the well being than? What is with the well being of the person in the wheelchair? Does that life not count more than the production of a wheelchair, the repair service for the car and so on? The same with ecological problems, if you produce whatever in a factory which pollutes whatever does that really contribute to the well being of the society if humans became ill because of that pollution?

It should be made clear that this is not against any kind of measurements, but we should be aware that we know what we exactly know what has been measured if we use numbers of any authority. The way those numbers came about should be as transparent as possible in every situation. It is simply unjust if governmental administration changes for example the way the unemployment rate is set up from on legislature towards another. If that happens society could think well done party Y you decreased unemployment, whereas the real unemployment is the same ore even more, but now people who are in a specific education program, but waiting for a job, simply do not count anymore. And not only society is taken for a ride by administration, scientists often enough also are. Although measurements change over the years they seem to be used unreflective too often in comparison studies. For

what purpose should research be then, just to give a bunch of paper which could legitimize this or that policy? In the last years the debate about the aim of pol-sci focused on the idea of politics consulting/ management. The idea is not to inform the public but to inform, support or help specialists. Which is in general not a bad idea. There is of course the danger of mutual abuse. Anyway, why isn't there the same demand to inform, support or help society to really live their democracy? Isn't it a fact that people live in democracy but the vast majority doesn't really know how it works? It almost seems to be mainly a "spectator-democracy".

Conclusion

"Power is if you can convince others of your definition of truth" (John R. Saul)

The way of teaching as we have experienced it so far suffers from a lack of creativity and does rarely encourage independent thinking. Since the scientific community also underlies structures of power, a danger of having an atmosphere of a "ruling" method or a "ruling" theory is given also in our university life. Of course dominating theories oppress other knowledge or theories. That means for us as a first step, as students to think about the possibility of searching for and using different literature than the one proposed by our professors. Unfortunately, this is by no means a matter of course. And this can by any case only be the start of trying to study and act more conscious. Looking at all the different problems listed above, one can sum up, that the prevailing political science as we describe it, can be suspected of disguising certain coherence and subliminal legitimising the status quo in a general way. It also runs the risk of getting totalitarian if we as student's do not get aware of our possibilities to bring pluralism back to our subject. Not sure of really having reached the bottom of all the questions we had, we conclude with a last statement. We have the possibility to broaden our demands to political science and can decide about the way we research, write and speak as far as we start thinking about it. What does that mean? You do not have to study many years first, to be able to judge certain developments in our scientific community, you can do this right now. And we hope that many of you share your experiences and thoughts with us in future discussions about political science as our sphere of influence.

LITERATURE:

- Albrecht, Ulrich; Altvater, Elmar.; Krippendorff, Ekkehart (Hrsg.): Was heißt und zu welchem Ende betreiben wir Politikwissenschaft? Opladen 1989
- Ashley, R.K., 1981, "Political Realism and Human Interest", in International Studies Quarterly, vol. 25, p.
- Berger, Peter L., Luckmann, Thomas, 'The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge', 1967, Garden City, N.Y.
- Cox; Robert W. 'Social forces, states, and world orders: international relations theory', in: Cox, Robert W., Sinclair, T., 'Approaches to World Order', 1996 [1981], Cambridge
- Foucault, Michel, 'Power/Knowledge', 1980, New York and London

- Horkeimer, Max, Adorno, Theodor W. , 'Dialektik der Aufklärung', 1947, Amsterdam
- Jacobsen, Kurt, 'Revolt in Political Science', in: Post-autistic newsletter No. 6, <http://groups.google.com/groups?>
- May, H.: Zusammenhänge zwischen innerer Demokratie und äußerem Frieden. Aachen 1984
- Oren, Ido, 'Is Culture Independent of National Security ? How America's National Security Concerns Shaped 'Political Culture' Research', in: European Journal of International Relations, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp.543-573
- Popper, Karl R., 'Logik der Forschung', 1976, Tübingen
- Saul, John R.: The Unconscious Civilization. Concord 1995
- Wright, Tony, 'Bad Language', in: The Guardian, 6.April 2001