

the future of political science

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Abstract

Political science has developed rapidly in the last half-century, but this has posed at least three serious problems. First, almost no attention has been given to political activity in private bodies: the scope of political analysis is narrowed as a result. Second, the connection between political science and 'policy analysis' is wholly unclear, which raises the danger that political science may want to cover too much or too little! Third, political science has always been concerned with norms, yet aims to be a science: this is no easy relationship.

Keywords micro-politics; policy analysis; ideology

The growth of political science has been very rapid during the second half of the twentieth century, although that growth has been geographically uneven. The American lead was very marked from the start: it has remained substantial. In contrast, advances in Africa and the Middle East have been limited. Advances in Latin America and Asia, East, Southeast and South, are somewhere in between, while, in Europe, determined efforts have been made to rise to the top, with mixed results, however: despite the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR), not just Eastern Europe, but even Southern Europe has not as yet followed the quick pace at which the number, size and professionalisation of departments occurred in Britain and Scandinavia.

Political science therefore needs to become truly universal: this is likely to

occur gradually, however, and almost automatically, while the discipline remains fragile in two respects that ostensibly affect its core development and perhaps its overall legitimacy. It is fragile in the sense that 'what is political' still needs a robust definition: that which was provided by the *Oxford Handbook of Political Science* of 2009 marks a return to past notions about the centrality of 'power', which do not summarise the characteristics of the political domain.¹ The discipline is also fragile since its search for a 'general theory' has been as inconclusive as it was in the early 1950s, when David Easton made a plea, in *The Political System* (1953: 53–55), for such a theory: no fundamental set of relationships among political phenomena has been found which can help to account for the dynamics of politics.

The existence of a general theory may not be a requirement to enable us to examine widely 'what is political'; the absence of a truly satisfactory definition is more of a handicap.² Yet the difficulties of political science in both respects seem to have resulted not in a genuine search for the solution of what are truly serious problems that the discipline must confront, but in what can be described as a mere search for reassurance by means of a single methodology, as if methodology was the most serious hurdle that the discipline has to overcome to become a 'genuine' science. As a matter of fact, a wide variety of methods enriches the discipline while it is simply presumptuous to claim that we know already *the way* in which human beings, in all their complexity, think and act politically.

THREE TYPES OF TASKS FOR THE FUTURE

There are indeed three sets of fundamental problems that the discipline needs to tackle if it is to increase its visibility in the world while retaining its authenticity. First, the discipline should cease to be concerned exclusively with politics in public bodies and in particular in the state: it must also devote itself to politics at the level of the 'man in the street'. The importance given to politics in public bodies has stemmed from the justified desire to domesticate these bodies and the state in particular; but this has been at the expense of inquiring into 'private politics', as Merriam used to call it (1944). While public politics is typically remote from the preoccupations of ordinary citizens, 'private' politics is much more obvious to all. The parallel here is with 'micro-economics' that occupies such an important place in economic analysis.

Second, a sound basis for political science is unlikely to be established so long as the relationship between political science and policy analysis is not carefully

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investigated. Policy analysis, which may be defined in broad terms as the systematic search for 'best practices' in policymaking, has come to be highly sophisticated in the elaboration of these practices: but the specific domain of political science has also become very unclear.

Third, the growth of political science has taken place largely outside the realm of ideology and generally of values. It seems to be widely assumed that, if democracy becomes 'the only game in town', at the state level at any rate, such questions cease to be truly relevant. This is not so. Democracy is a value that not all those who preach it do practice while those who do not preach it are not always marginalised. Values are embedded in the fabric of the discipline inextricably. A *modus vivendi* has to be found to ensure that values continue to play a key part in the analysis of politics and are not relegated to being remnants of earlier epochs.

This agenda is a tall order. It is not one that can be elaborated in detail in a paper of a few pages; nor is such a paper the place where solutions to these problems can be proposed, let alone elaborated. All that can be done here is to make the case with respect to the three problematic areas that have just been outlined and to hope that this case will raise enough interest to become part of an ongoing conversation about the future of political science.

THE NEED FOR 'MICRO-POLITICS'

Political science ignores 'private politics' despite the fact that, in ordinary language, the existence of politics in private organisations is widely referred to in groups of all kinds, from the family to the local environment, to the firm and to voluntary bodies. The refusal to consider 'micro-politics' can only be accounted for on the grounds that such matters are regarded as less important: yet this is not likely to be the case for most people. The contrast with what takes place in economics is striking: at any rate in 'developed' countries, most adults have some idea of the way in which economic matters impinge on their daily lives, in terms of prices, jobs and therefore livelihood. On the other hand, because 'micro-politics' is not examined at all, most people are made to believe that the only politics 'which counts' occurs at the top: but what occurs at the top is rather esoteric to them and often regarded as unpleasant if not plainly morally wrong. To counter this view, the domain of the discipline has to be enlarged in such a way that it becomes clear that politics is a universal activity, neither better nor worse intrinsically than any other, and, for instance, that 'curious' deals do occur in both micro- and macro-economic activities as well as in 'micro-' and 'macro-' politics!

Yet it is not just that the image of politics would be different if everyone was made aware of the fact that political behaviour occurs at all levels of society: our understanding of the processes and dynamics of political activity would improve, since the characteristics of 'private politics' are appreciably simpler than those of the state, in the same way as the characteristics of micro-economics are appreciably easier to fathom than those of macro-economics. By limiting themselves to the study of the state, political scientists constrain themselves to the

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most difficult level of analysis: no wonder that the drive towards a general theory has so far been wholly inconclusive.

The question of the definition of political science plays a key role in this respect. As was noted in the introduction, Robert Goodin in the 2009 *Oxford Handbook* returns to the old notion of (social) power as the crucial and defining factor. It is, of course, debatable whether this is as overwhelmingly the case as is suggested by the definition. What is more important is that such a definition is concerned with what is at most an instrument, not with what politics is about. Politics is not 'about' power: it is about taking collective decisions in all the groups that exist, whether public or private, whether large or small. While economics is about the exchange of goods among two or more persons who come together only for the purpose of such an exchange, politics is about finding solutions to problems that concern communities. The determinant factor is that a decision has to be taken; it must also be noted that such a decision has to be applied to all those who come within the purview of the relevant organisation, whether it is public or private. This definition is close to the one that Easton gave, in 1953, in *The Political System*, as being 'the authoritative allocation of values' (1953: 133–135): that is the political goal, a goal that may be – and indeed is – achieved by means other than social power but by consensus, and a goal that is not achieved unless a collective decision-making process has taken place. When one thinks in terms of collective

decision making, the general 'domain' of what is 'political' begins to emerge, whether in public or in private bodies.

It may be argued that matters are different when one leaves public bodies to look at other organisations; only the former has the 'right' to oblige people to obey. However, this distinction is not valid in practice. States that find it difficult to implement their decisions are numerous; private groups that manage to force their members (however associated) are also legion. Thus the question of the implementation of collective decisions by states and other organisations is a matter of degree, along a dimension, not a consequence of the legal powers of states.

It is therefore both academically imperative and practically very advantageous for political science to open itself to 'micro-politics'. Micro-politics does not concern elections to which all citizens of democratic states are enjoined to be involved, but, along the lines of micro-economics, it concerns what citizens do everyday in the bodies to which they belong. Opening political science along these lines would of course mean a major shift in the way in which politics is taught in universities and colleges. The resistance from vested interests may therefore be substantial: but the future of political science as a discipline depends on such a shift taking place, even if it takes place gradually. This is the way in which political science can become not just a popular subject of study and research, but one that will follow (indeed anticipate) the way reflections on society in general are taking place in the twenty-first century.

POLICY STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Meanwhile, policy studies have grown so rapidly in the last decades of the twentieth century that they have probably become the most relevant domain of

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social inquiry. That branch of inquiry originated from the need, especially in the context of the state, but it also originated from the needs of other bodies, public or private, and of the largest ones in particular, to be systematic in the search for the best solutions to the problems they face. Naturally, policy studies refer to all the social sciences that are relevant to the problem at hand: they are inherently cross-disciplinary and they do not have to worry about or depend on academic idiosyncrasies. As a result, the relationship between policy studies and political science has scarcely been raised, let alone been clarified: the standard answer given at that point is probably that policy analysis is cross-disciplinary and therefore relates to politics as it does to sociology, economics and all other social sciences.

The matter is not as simple, however. On the one hand, policy analysis is concerned substantively with matters social, economic and, why not, political. Policy analysts reflect upon the way in which these aspects need to be brought together in order to arrive at what would be a sensible comprehensive policy. On the other hand, the relationship between policy analysis and political science is also concerned with the policies that are 'offered', so to speak, to those in charge of decision making, that is to say the politicians. While the substance of policy analysis is cross-disciplinary, the final stage of the process consists in a relationship between policy analysts and decision makers, that is to say persons concerned with *political* decision making. This means that policy analysts themselves may insidiously become decision makers as they

'propose' particular ways of handling problems to the 'regular politicians'. This is not the crux of the matter, however. The key point is that policy analysis comes to merge with politics; the study of the processes that then take place is clearly part of the domain of political science.

Here again, the question of the definition of political science is obviously central. The limitations of the definition proposed by Robert Goodin in the 2009 *Oxford Handbook* appear even more clearly, as what is at stake here is obviously not the instrument that is being used (whether it is power or not), but the goal that is being sought. The determinant factor is that a decision has to be taken by those who are defined as the 'decision makers', a decision that will be applicable to those who come within the purview of the relevant organisation, public or private. It is up to the decision makers to elaborate, as Easton said, the 'authoritative allocation of values'.

The relationship between policy analysis and political science is therefore peculiar. As a matter of fact, its peculiarity extends markedly backwards in that it colours the process of elaboration of policies by policy analysts, retrospectively, so to speak, when they come to be concerned with 'political matters'. This occurs retrospectively because it has an impact on this elaboration well before the moment that policy is presented to the 'regular' decision makers, that is to say the 'politicians' in the case of the state. When policy analysts determine what are regarded as 'types of policy-relevant information', for instance, they naturally consider what is likely to be 'possible' politically.³

The relationship between policy analysis and political science needs therefore to be clarified. This clarification has to take place with respect to the decision moment, when, as was suggested earlier, policy analysts may be regarded as being part of the political process itself. Political

science has a crucial part to play in determining the nature of the relationship between policy analysts and politicians at this point; otherwise, the question would arise as to whether politics is being taken over by policy analysts and comes to be conducted by 'philosopher-kings' or by 'technocrats'.⁴

Yet an exercise of the same kind should also be undertaken during the earlier phases, when decision makers' reactions are being anticipated by policy analysts. The relationship between policy analysis and political science is therefore truly special. It is not concerned merely with the type of information required, as might be the case with respect to the other social sciences: it is concerned with the way the decision process is shaped and, by anticipation, with the way in which the preparation of that process occurs. Given the continuous growth and ever-increasing complexity of policy analysis, the question of the relationship between what is political and what politicians might or might not do will gradually also become more problematic. The boundary between the two domains will not only need to be systematically examined: it must also be re-assessed periodically (Genieys and Smyrl, 2008: 43).

THE VALUES IMPERATIVE

All of the social sciences are concerned with the values held by those who propose policies, but political science is special in that the whole discipline is embedded in ideology and values. Collective decisions require that all those involved share some underlying values.

Yet, the very fact that values are embedded in political decision making seems to mean that political matters cannot be studied in a 'scientific' manner, as one cannot clearly distinguish facts from values. Naturally enough, political scientists have attempted to circumvent the problem by assuming it away: if

people come together to make a decision, the question of the values is indeed solved as far as that decision is concerned; alternatively, where values are an overriding obstacle, no decision is taken; there is no longer politics between the parties that have in effect 'seceded'.⁵ One might conclude that the existence of a 'political system', to use Easton's expression, implies that there will be no 'system' unless there is fundamental value agreement.

While such a conclusion may be drawn in a given context, or perhaps even in a given political system, political science – as a whole – cannot arrive at this end. Political science has to contend with the fact that there is a lack of understanding between potential participants in many cases. Comparative government is full of examples of political systems based on different values. As a result, no progress seems possible in that branch of political science unless one accepts that values profoundly shape the character of political systems.

Indeed, a value-based approach was adopted in traditional approaches to comparative government. It came under increasing pressure, however, as it seemed to render 'scientific' comparisons impossible. To say that the citizens of a given country refuse a certain type of decision on the grounds that their values prevent them from agreeing to that decision means that one lacks a common framework with which to assess, let alone measure what occurs. This seems to render political science fundamentally different from the other social sciences.

Admittedly, this predicament of political science – and in particular of its comparative government 'branch' – is due to the fact that the discipline is more 'adventurous' than are the other social science disciplines in going beyond the boundaries of what is typically regarded as the 'mainstream social science world'. Only anthropology appears concerned with

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such an 'adventure', but anthropology is concerned primarily with the 'unusual', not with the 'mainstream'. Meanwhile, however, if 'mainstream' policy analysts seldom mix with anthropologists, they are likely to be in frequent contact with political scientists for the reasons that we examined earlier. Admittedly, the cases in which an open 'clash of values' emerges tend not to be 'mainstream', but 'mainstream' political scientists are likely to have been in contact with situations in which there is an echo, perhaps only faint, to be sure, of such a clash of values. On occasion, clashes do break to the surface, as occurred before the collapse of communism in Europe: what was then described (momentarily) as the 'end of history' in 1989 was in reality the (apparent) end of a major 'clash of values'.

As a whole, political science is far from immune to a confrontation with the problems posed by the clash of values. As there is often a temptation to avoid the problem, the more radical 'mainstream' members of the profession endeavour to reject altogether the notion that values are to have a key place in the discipline. The assumption of universal 'rationality' is one of the most prevalent ways of denying any need to give values such a place in their own right. However idiosyncratic values may be, the problems are assumed away by stipulating that all human beings are motivated by a common drive to pursue their interest. That interest is indeed defined in a rather restricted manner or includes just about any kind of maximisation so long as there is enough consistency among the preferences (Simon, 1985).

The truth is that there is no way out of the problem. What seems to be 'the end of ideology' at one point in time has the knack of being replaced by a new clash of ideologies at another point in time. Thus, rather than deny the existence of values (in an attempt to make the discipline appear more 'scientific' and ostensibly more like the other social sciences), political science has to keep one foot in 'mainstream' analysis and another foot in more 'unusual' cases, where value differences play a large part. Political science must find a way of adjusting to the predicament. In the doing, it can show other disciplines how to deal with the challenges of values that lie just outside the 'mainstream'. How political science will handle that matter will demonstrate whether it is truly able to deal with the 'political' in its integral complexity.

Political science cannot continue to develop as it has in the past. At the beginning of the twentieth century, political science was a small discipline, alive mostly in a single country, the United States. It grew in an 'unscientific' manner, as a matter of fact, by being linked to history, law or philosophy, in the various countries, mostly European, where it began to make its mark. That growth was pushed in large part by curiosity: curiosity about political developments,

many of which were taking place as a result of the 'revolutions' in values – or the 'evolutions' of values – which occurred since the eighteenth century. Political science then experienced rapid growth from the 1960s and 1970s: many of its leading scholars began to face the problem of the discipline 'having' to become 'truly' scientific, following the example of other social sciences, especially economics.

Yet political science will only thrive if it remains true to its characteristics while adapting to the new environment in which it operates. The three key problems that it has to face are symbolic of the necessary mix between past experience and new developments. Political science must be prepared to go deeper down into society than it has done so far – and this will be achieved if micro-politics is taken seriously. It must be in tune with developments occurring alongside its own bailiwick, among policy analysts in particular, but it must keep its character – that of being *the* discipline concerned with collective decision making. It must remain true to the fact that it was born to put forward new values and to defend their right to exist: it must continue to do so while ensuring that this does not render impossible the achievement of a 'scientific mission', which it also has to fulfil.

Notes

1 (Goodin, 2009: 5). The expression adopted in 2009 is that 'politics is the constrained use of social power'. The 1996 formula was the same except that it was preceded by the expression that politics 'might best be characterised' in that way (Goodin and Klingemann, 1996: 8).

2 The point here is not to claim that there should be an intangible definition, but merely a broad notion as to 'what political phenomena' are about. See Favre (1995).

3 See for instance Dunn (1994, Chapter 1, especially at 12–13).

4 The *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* (2006) is rather disappointing in this respect, in that it takes unashamedly the position of political scientists rather than examining the point of view of 'technocrats' or for that matter 'philosopher-kings'. In the introduction of the work, this standpoint is shown by the fact that the expression 'technocratic hubris' (p. 3) is used to refer to the approaches of 'high modernists'; *a contrario*, the *Handbook* is said to be concerned with what are described as 'new, modest modes' (p. 4). That approach is echoed in the conclusion ('Reflections on Policy Analysis: Putting it Together Again') in which R. Klein and T.R. Marmor define public policy as 'what governments do and neglect to do'

(p. 892): one could not be clearer about stating that policy analysis is about what the policymakers do, which means that it is therefore squarely within political science. This approach does not seem to tally with many of the works of those who engage in Public Policy Analysis, such as that of W.N. Dunn quoted in the previous note.

5 There is clearly politics among all the parties concerned, up to the point when secession takes place, and there is – of course – politics within each of the parties afterwards.

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