

What is Political Science for?

A response to Graetsch and Theocharis

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Abstract: Central to Theocharis' and Graetsch's article in *Politikon's* last issue is the question of whether today's political science community is not only asking the wrong questions but also arriving at normatively doubtful answers. Needless to say, the authors of the article arrive at a positive answer to that question, based on their idea that a specific methodology necessarily leads to a certain set of answers. The methodology that Theocharis' and Graetsch's critique aims at, is the positivist approach to science, which, as they claim, dominates current political science discourse. From the authors perspective, the positivist approach leads to short-sighted and normatively doubtful results. The inherent logic of Theocharis' and Graetsch's argument is that there is a genuine link between theoretical or scientific knowledge and the subsequent behaviour of decision-makers in the actual realm of politics. The baseline of the argument is that economically biased methods inevitably lead, via economically biased theories, to economically biased politics. In a nutshell we will argue, that while it is true that there are people abusing (pseudo-scientific) theories to justify their personal dogmas – e.g. a supply-side neo-liberal worldview –, this does not mean that certain results are inherent to a specific methodology.

Starting from the term political science we ask ourselves what the difference between science and politics is? We will argue that wrong answers and misleading questions do not derive from a specific methodology, but rather from the uncritical application of any scientific methodology. We want to emphasize that, in our view, there is a difference between scientifically gained knowledge and the paramount reality of everyday life, acquired through everyday experience.

We share Theocharis' and Graetsch's view that critical reflection is central to science and that a critical disposition should be adopted towards any scientific theory. After all, science should build a common ground on which various theories compete for plausible answers – ideally in a non-dogmatic way.

Having said this, political science should aim at explaining specific aspects of human behavior. This is to say that its task is not to promote certain ideologies. It should rather enable us to separate the identification of mechanisms operating in a given society from the normative evaluation of these mechanisms. Political Science, therefore, should not introduce politics to science, but science to politics.

Theocharis and Graetsch heavily draw on Berger and

Luckmann's idea of "The social construction of reality". Berger and Luckmann focus their work on the "paramount reality" of everyday life. Their occupation is not with scientific knowledge, but with knowledge produced in the "Lebenswelt" of everyday experience (Berger and Luckmann 1966: pp. 14, 26, 39).

According to Berger and Luckmann man is anthropologically bound not to question the validity of his or her perception of reality. The decisions of everyday life are governed by pragmatism and routine action. This means that there is a direct link between knowledge acquired in the "Lebenswelt" and individual action. The perceived reality is taken for granted as long as there is no misfit between actual experiences and the expectations based on prior knowledge (Luckmann and Schütz 1979: 254; Berger and Luckmann 1966: 38).

In contrast to knowledge acquired and applied in everyday life, scientific knowledge is not backed up by primary socialization and its everyday verification (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 162). Thus, scientific knowledge is prone to be questioned! In accordance with Berger and Luckmann, Popper claims that the production of – in his case scientific – knowledge starts with the appearance of problems (Popper 1969: 104). In scientific discourses different solutions should be proposed to one problem, due to a plurality of methodological approaches as well as a plurality of possible answers from within the same methodology.

The plurality of answers thereby produced should generate enough critical potential for dissenting opinions to compete for the most plausible solution. The central idea of positivism is the non-acceptance of any one answer as "the truth".

An idea which is manifested in

the principle of falsification. Thus, positivism in itself is a critical enterprise! Exactly because scientific knowledge must be constantly questioned, we assume that solutions generated by a scientific discourse cannot be directly transformed into political programs, without raising normative questions. Therefore the realm of political science and the realm of politics should be separated. Of course, this is an ideal-type illustration of how science should work. But leaving this firm ground endangers us to be lured away by the truth-claimers of political ideologies. This brings us back to Theocharis' and Graetsch's critique of the empirico-analytical approach to political science. They claim that human beings cannot be reduced to figures and rational actors.



This is definitely true. But does this tell us anything about the explanatory power of rational choice theory and statistical analysis, when applied to certain problems?

To be sure, neither of them can tell us the whole story about human behavior in all its aspects and in every situation. But what these methods can do is to provide a structuring framework, which, as an analytical tool, is an indispensable precondition for any empirically informed discussion. Thus, a certain reductionism is helpful to grasp reality and to identify basic mechanisms and patterns at work. Besides, rational choice theory does allow for the incorporation of (sociological) norms and values into the preference function of a rational actor. Rational choice theory is not limited to the homo oeconomicus, perfectly rational and fully informed in all instances. What it is saying, though, that given a specific ordering of preferences, which has to be defined, the individual will choose the option that best fits his preferences. In some cases this might well be an altruistic goal and not only profit-maximizing. Remember: We are not dealing with micro-economics, but with rational actors in a political context.

The knowledge creating value of a formal model lies in its ability to point out discrepancies between the predictions based on its underlying assumptions and the empirically observed behavior. Once discovered, the discrepancies between the universal account and the empirically observed have to be covered by more detailed research that takes into account the specificities of the case at hand. The need to explicate the underlying assumptions and the working hypothesis, inherent to formal models, are enhancing the potential for intersubjective criticism. Each part of these explanations is open to criticism, whereas a complex, holistic model can hardly be criticized without abandoning it altogether. So, are we living in the “risk-/adventure-/fun-/atomized/cosmopolitan society” as Ulrich Beck is trying to tell us? And if so, what does it mean and what are the consequences?

Also, reductionism is often necessary to deal with complex, interrelated phenomena in an intersubjective manner, that allows us to track and counter the other persons argument.

So, what is political science for? Our previous discussion should have made clear that in our perspective an empirical and positivist approach does not necessarily privilege certain politico-economical interests. Thus the question cannot be whom political science is for. We claim that methodological approaches do not necessarily in themselves transport ideological and normative propositions.

Rather, through uncritical application they can be abused to that end. Thus, although being just a figure, a quantile might tell us something about social inequality, which other approaches might disguise. Aggregated figures can provide the broad picture, which, of course, are only a

somewhat reduced representation of reality longing for interpretation. So, the GDP can be interpreted as the overall welfare of a society, or the performance of the economy of a given country. This leaves us enough room to, on the one hand, criticize the meaning of the construct “GDP” in terms of its adequacy for the question we are dealing with and on the other hand discuss the way the variable “GDP” is measured statistically. Therefore, statistical analysis provides us with the facts that are the subject of our discussion. The abstract character of statistics neither attributes a certain quality to the individuals making up the sample - we are not anonymous numbers staggering around in a sterile world! - nor does it tell us anything about the normative status of the status quo. So what?

Statistical analysis is a useful tool to first get facts on the world at all and then discuss it. Rational choice theory might be dominant in some areas of political science. This should not lead to any exclusionary claim about the scientific status of other approaches. Advocates of different approaches should be able to enter scientific debates and make use of insights discovered by methods other than their own. So let's get out of our ideological trenches and compete with arguments. May the most plausible explanation prevail!

Political science, being an interdisciplinary enterprise from the very beginning, can combine insights of various research traditions, and thus arrive at a broader framework. This framework should allow us to avoid analytical inadequacies we might identify in overly economic as well as purely sociological approaches. To paraphrase Berger and Luckmann: Our conception of science implies a specific conception of political science in general. It does not imply that political science is not a science, that its methods should be other than empirical or that it cannot be “value-free”. It does imply however that political science takes its place in the company of the sciences that deal with man as man (Berger and Luckmann 1966:211).

As a consequence political science is able to leave the ivory tower and propose a number of solutions to a given problem. The final choice about what solution to implement will always be based on normative grounds. This goes back to our previous statement that in our view political science and politics should be treated as separate spheres. We are aware of the danger of conflating both spheres and agree with Berger and Luckmann who state that “To exaggerate the importance of theoretical thought in society and history is a natural failing of the theorizers” (Berger and Luckmann: p. 27).

In our view the responsibility of us as political science students is, therefore, to assess ideas critically, to always consider a number of approaches and to utilize the critical potential inherent to any methodology – thereby avoiding harmful intellectual hegemony.

LITERATURE

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