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## WHAT NEXT FOR THE STUDIES OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AS A DISCIPLINE? A TENTATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA

Thibaud BONCOURT

### Abstract

This text is an edited version of the opening remarks that Thibaud Boncourt, Past President of the Research Committee 33 (The Study of Political Science as a Discipline) of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) and Associate Professor at University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne / Centre Européen de Sociologie et de Science Politique (CESSP), gave at the special panel “The Future of the Studies of Political Science as a Discipline” sponsored by IPSA-RC33 at the 7<sup>th</sup> international interdisciplinary conference of political research *SCOPE: Science of Politics* (University of Bucharest, 20-24 September 2021, [www.scienceofpolitics.eu](http://www.scienceofpolitics.eu)). The event was organized and hosted by the Centre for the International Cooperation and Development Studies (IDC) of the Department of Comparative Governance and European Studies, Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, and gathered participants from several countries on all continents, via a virtual meeting. The aim of the panel was to contribute to the global conversation on the current state of political science as a discipline, as well as to discuss the practical means through which IPSA-RC33 can contribute to it and to support the work of political scientists worldwide.

**Keywords:** political science as a discipline, IPSA RC33, institutionalization, de-institutionalization, autonomization, gendering, postcolonizing

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, I was trained to believe that, as a scientist, one should not talk about the future, as it is always a slippery ground. One would better just limit oneself to talking about “what has been” or about “what is.” Consequently, “what will be” has never been my forte. In spite of these misgivings, the reason why I accepted the challenge of reflecting on “the future of the studies of political science as a discipline”, is that I still think it is an exciting intellectual exercise to try and anticipate what may or may not happen to a field of study in which I have specialized for fifteen years. A little warning, though, is in order: I am not going to predict what is going to happen. Part of what I am going to say will be wishful thinking on my part in the sense that I may mostly speak about things that I would like to see tackled rather than things that will indeed be tackled. Therefore, what I am going to talk about is probably more of a reflection of my own research interests and agendas. In that sense, it is largely a situated speculation. I do not pretend to know everything that has been written about the studies of political science as a discipline. There are things that I have read, things that I have not read, things about which that I am more aware of and things that I do not specialize on. Therefore, I am likely to disappoint quite a number of people by mentioning or insisting on some topics and forgetting others altogether. Therefore, I apologize in advance to those who feel that I bypass some issues that they see as crucial. Be assured that I do not willingly disregard these issues. It is just that I have not thought of them in the particular context of this reflection.

I would like to begin by saying that in this sort of intellectual exercise where one tries to anticipate the future, it is always tempting to think that everything will change. Our natural inclination is towards science fiction – towards anticipating things that are not yet there for us to see. There is nothing exciting about stating that the status quo will endure. Change is always much more appealing.

But as political scientists, we know that every social process is marred by a certain amount of path dependency. Therefore, one should first anticipate a measure of continuity in the studies of political science as a discipline. Thus, the three main topics that I am going to delineate have already been tackled in some way by the existing literature. However, I am anticipating that these major topics will eventually move on or branch out from what has been done before. These three topics are (1) the relationship between political science and politics; (2) the circulation of political science ideas; and (3) the unity and divisions of political science. All three of these are classical areas of reflection in our field, but I think that they are currently undergoing some changes and that these changes may possibly/perhaps/hopefully still evolve.

The first of these topics is the **relationship between political science and politics**. Historically, studies of political science as a discipline have been concerned with the institutionalization and the professionalization of the discipline in different parts of the world, mostly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and particularly the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These studies have looked at the different ways in which the discipline has been incorporated into higher education and research, and how it became embedded in professional associations and networks. They reached different conclusions. They emphasize, first, the relatively indeterminate character of the disciplines' intellectual and institutional agenda: the incorporation of political studies into existing scientific professional, academic, and scientific structures is marked by a measure of improvisation (Gaiti & Scot 2017). They also highlight the strong relationship between the development of political science and politics. Actors external to the scientific field, and most notably political actors, play a big part in the institutionalization of the discipline. More specifically, one of the prominent narratives on the matter is that the development of liberal democracy is intrinsically linked to that of political science, as if the two went hand in hand, with freedom of speech setting the stage for the rise of an academic discourse on things political (Easton, Gunnell & Stein 1995).

I expect such studies to keep developing. To some extent, this is a never-ending story. Studies of the relationship between political regimes and the development of the disciplines are bound to be continuously produced, mostly because they are still asymmetrical at the geographical level: we know a lot about how these processes unfolded in the West and the North, but we lack data about the East and the South. Therefore, there is still rebalancing to be done, even though, in recent years, studies on the topic in these other parts of the world have been taking up speed as well. At the same time, I expect that a certain degree of challenge to the dominant narrative will continue to be produced. I especially believe that the supposedly linear relationship between political science and democracy will continue to be challenged. In line with recent studies that have emphasized the fact that authoritarian regimes may also play a part in the development of the discipline, I expect future research to highlight the diversity of political contexts in which political science took root (Ravecca 2019).

However, the major evolution that I expect is a move from studies of the *institutionalization* of the discipline to what I would call studies of the *de-institutionalization* of the discipline. Political science has indeed been subjected to heavy criticism in some contexts, from all kinds of movements – most times ones that are labelled as “reactionary”, but not always. Their narrative often describes political science (and/or related fields such as sociology, gender studies, etc.) as being too progressive and putting cultural traditions, or traditions in general, in jeopardy. In many contexts this narrative has had practical, policy implications: social and political sciences have been subjected to pressures, departments have been dismantled, researchers have been trialed and/or sentenced, etc. This process has been quite prominent in the news, and legitimate cause for professional alarm. But, scientifically speaking, we do lack in-depth understanding about the way it works, save for a few pioneering studies on the matter (e.g. Paternotte & Verloo 2021). We do not know much about the politics of disciplinary breakdowns. Why and how do disciplines fade away or resist under such pressures? What kind of mobilizations (political or otherwise) take place around these processes? What are the repertoires and resources of the key actors in these processes? Crucially, are there variations across national boundaries? Does political science as a discipline resist / survive in different ways, in different contexts? If it fades away, by what is it replaced? Is it by nothing, or by something that would be seen as more politically proper? Are such processes affecting all types of social and political sciences? In short, how do these processes differ from those that we have been predominantly studying in the past decades?

These are of course the most extreme forms of de-institutionalization, but they are not the only ones. It is not only about political science being dismissed. It is also about political science being increasingly regulated. This does not just happen to political science. The dominant trend in recent years

has been the rise of new public management techniques in the regulation of the sciences in general and the social sciences in particular, political science being no exception to this process (Shore & Wright 1999). Just like other scientists, political scientists are expected increasingly to meet publication targets, to be cited, to secure grants, to have a social impact, and so on. All these objectives are incorporated in different evaluation schemes, although to different degrees in different national contexts. This goes hand in hand with the scarcity of resources available to political scientists, which also differ in different contexts. We do not know much about how these affect political scientists and political science. The general process of the rise of new public management mechanisms in higher education has been documented, but there are only a few studies that deal specifically with the case of political science (Flinders 2013). This means that knowledge is scarce, especially in different national contexts and comparatively, about the extent to which political science complies to these constraints or resists to them (Bleiklie, Brans & Michelsen 2020), about the impact of the scarcity of human and economic resources on the discipline, and about the way in which political science associations identify, understand and tackle these issues, or whether / how they evolve in reaction to these issues. In my view, all these complexify our understanding of the relationship between political science and politics, as they challenge even more the dominant narrative about political science developing freely in democratic contexts.

The second point on which I would like to insist is the **circulation of political science ideas**. Historically, this question has essentially been tackled through the topic of the circulation of political science beyond national borders (Adcock, Bevir & Stimson 2007). Therefore, the main question has been that of the internationalization of political science: how paradigms circulate, and how ideas and methods become dominant across national boundaries. The main narrative in this respect has been the center-periphery perspective, with an emphasis on a certain amount of domination from the global North, on a certain homogenization and Americanization of the discipline, and on the global spread of paradigms that are dominant in the global North (Smith 2000, Heilbron, Sora & Boncourt 2018). Again, I do not expect this trend to change fundamentally. The mapping of the tensions between global diffusion processes and local intellectual traditions is very much likely to continue. However, there is a challenge to this narrative. We currently witness a movement to de-colonize the history of the discipline by not simply pointing out the spread of dominant paradigms, but also by insisting on local intellectual traditions that may have been quashed at some point (Keim et al. 2014). I think and I hope that this act of rebalancing the history of the discipline to incorporate elements of global circulation, together with local intellectual traditions, is likely to continue.

At the same time, I also hope for the development studies that understand the notion of circulation in a broader sense – not only in terms of transnational circulation. For example, we are still quite in the dark with regard to the social dissemination of political science ideas. Over the last few decades, political science has produced much knowledge, as well as many graduates, and these circulated in different social spheres. But we do not know much about the extent to which this knowledge has circulated in different social classes and social movements, for example. We assume that such influences exist, but we do not have many systematic studies that would tell us what this knowledge actually does in non-academic spheres. We also have a lot to learn about the social conditions under which this knowledge might circulate, and about the social groups and the social contexts where this knowledge does not circulate. Therefore, I would expect and hope that some studies about the diffusion of political science knowledge in society at large be developed at some stage.

In my view, these could go together with an analysis of the way in which political science develops at the intersection of the public and private sectors. This is a complex topic in the sense that in different countries, political science has sometimes developed predominantly in the context of public higher education, while in other countries, it has mostly emerged in the context of private research centers (Ravecca 2019). This difference, and how it impacts the nature of the knowledge produced, has seldom been taken seriously. We are quick to sound the alarm when medical knowledge, for example, is produced by the private sector. In such cases we look for potential conflicts of interest and for potential changes in the content of ideas. But these processes have not been much documented in the case of social sciences and of political science in particular, although studies of various funding schemes and their effects have paved the way – for example about philanthropic foundation grants (Guillhot 2011, Hauptmann 2012) and military subsidies (Boncourt et al. 2020).

The third and last point that I would like to tackle is that of the **unity and divisions of political science as a discipline**. Historically, the extent to which the discipline is divided or unified has been substantially documented, in different ways. The emphasis has been put on identifying different national intellectual traditions, for instance, the fact that the discipline has been historically structured by law in certain countries or history in other countries or influenced by sociology in other countries yet (Favre 1989, Hayward, Barry & Brown 2003). In short, there is a certain amount of division in intellectual terms internationally. The attention has also been on the fragmentation of the discipline into sub-disciplines. There have been numerous debates on whether the intellectual coherence / the unity of the discipline would be put in jeopardy by the progressive autonomization of sub-disciplines from the main umbrella of political science, with International Relations as a subdiscipline often being offered as an example. This goes together with a concern about the inclusiveness of political science. More specifically, to what extent does political science in different contexts incorporate certain sub-disciplines? For example, to what extent is political theory welcome into the general umbrella of political science, and to what extent is it excluded in different contexts?

All these topics are, in my view, likely to keep being tackled, but I anticipate that the studies of the internal divisions of political science may become even more complex in the future. Studies about the inclusiveness of the discipline have recently moved beyond the study of subdisciplines, to incorporate concerns about the social dimension of inclusiveness, in terms of gender, in terms of race and ethnicity, in terms of social class. However, this has been to an extent, very much theoretical in the sense that empirical data is lacking in some cases. While we have a growing amount of empirical data on the gender side of things (Engeli & Mügge 2020), we have little information about race and ethnicity, and, to my knowledge, even fewer about social class (Briscoe-Palmer & Mattocks 2020). There are increasingly more studies on such matters, but there is still a lot of work that remains to be done if we are to get a proper image of the social characteristics of political science.

At the intellectual level, political science is also slightly torn apart not only by the internal specialization or autonomization of certain sub-disciplines, but also by the development of new fields of studies that have been called loosely “studies”, for instance environmental studies, digital studies, gender studies, etc. Some political scientists are increasingly locating themselves into these new fields, while other colleagues are increasingly drawn towards new research fields such as neurosciences or data sciences as part of the increasing sophistication of their research methods. The question that I am asking myself and that I would be keen to see researched is the extent to which this is just an extension of what was already there. Is it a kind of continuation of the process of specialization that I mentioned earlier? Or is it much more of a paradigm change that is on a different order of magnitude to what we have witnessed before? To what extent are these evolutions making political science “obsolete” in a way? Do they mean that the older disciplines that were dominant until now are fading away to be replaced by something else? If I was to ask this provocatively, do these evolutions signal that other disciplines or other types of studies may simply do a better job than political science in assessing current social evolutions?

Lastly, one thing that we have only partially taken seriously until now is the internal political divisions of the discipline. I have touched upon this earlier on when I mentioned the tensions between political science and politics. When we chat with one another, we spontaneously tend to refer to parts of the discipline as progressive and to others as conservative, or we tend to refer to the right-wing and left-wing of the discipline, but this is very much our informal talk. We lack systematical, empirical attempts to assess the extent to which these labels are relevant and the processes through which these labels are ascribed to parts of the discipline and the conflicts that they may generate (Gross 2013). Research on such matters would greatly enrich our understanding of the tensions and debates in the field.

To wrap up, what I am expecting for the future is partly some amount of revisiting the history of political science by incorporating especially some intersectional perspectives, for instance by gendering and by postcolonializing the history of the discipline. I am also expecting studies of political science as a discipline to not simply analyze historical data, but also what is currently happening - moving from history to sociology. And I am wondering if, during this process, we will clarify what purpose the studies of political science as a discipline serve, what they are for. There are those that see themselves as contributions to political science, meaning that they study political science as a discipline to understand political processes such as public policymaking or political competition. Alternatively,

there are studies of political science that see themselves as contributions to science studies – for example, contributions to the understanding of the rise and fall of disciplines. And other studies yet see themselves as potentially engaging reflexively and normatively, as they tentatively provide a platform to engage with professional debates about how the discipline should evolve, how political science should engage, etc.

I will stop here, however, as this is probably enough work for the next few decades or so.

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