

POLITICAL SCIENCE AS A SCIENCE

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[ABSTRACT

The question of the definition of "science" in this context, and the nature and object of the work of the political scientist. Academic roles and responsibility in the field of practical politics are not separable, and the political scientist has no sovereign control of his "material", but is partially subjected to environmental influences. Schools of thought, scepticism and empiricism, and the weaknesses of modern political science. Confusion with the principles of natural science; the example of H. D. Lasswell. Behavioural scientists and modern trends.]

Science according to my dictionary, is "knowledge systematically arranged", and, after dealing with the definition of applied, natural and pure science it adds the *obiturn dictum* that political economy is known as "the dismal science". Now the fusion of political and economic studies was the first step taken in the 19th century, in the evolution of the modern academic discipline which has become known as Political Science, and there are those today, like Prof. Hans Morgenthau in his "Dilemmas of Politics" (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958) who argue that at the present time Political Science is often as dismal a subject as political economy once became. Yet political science is as old at least as Plato's "Academy" or as Aristotle's eternally modern works on politics and ethics, and indeed if ever this subject becomes a dull, or a dismal science, it must be because the methods, the objects, and the imagination of political scientists are irrelevant or incomprehensible to the people they ought to be addressing.

Doubts are often expressed about Political Science, and questions are raised as to whether it is a science at all. Some academicians cloak their uncertainty about it by calling the University departments in which it is studied Departments of Political Studies, or even more broadly Departments of Social Studies, the word "science" is tacitly dropped. Politics, they say, is an art; and it is an aspect of life which is too unpredictable and too intractable to the application of scientific methods of analysis, to qualify as a science. But these propositions of course are based upon a misunderstanding of the word 'science', which, we have seen, in its general meaning is knowledge systematically arranged; but again, as the UNESCO Survey of Contemporary Political Science

(Publication No. 426, Paris, 1950) indicated in 1950, this systematic arrangement could apply to "acquired knowledge verified by accurate observation and logical thought", or more broadly to "the sum of co-ordinated knowledge relative to a determined subject", which would make empirical verification less necessary to the systematisation of knowledge (*ibid*, p. 3). In concluding that the latter definition should apply to the UNESCO panel of scholars who contributed to the Survey seemed to be saying that Political Science is not perfectly scientific in so far as strict empirical verification is not always necessary to it, and that this was certainly borne out when methodology in political science was examined. Experts in the methodology of political science, the authors of the Survey reported, "are wont to speak of a variety of methods: philosophical, dialectical, juridical, historical, sociological, psychological, economic and normative methods, methods of liberty and of the natural sciences, experimental, integral and statistical methods, &c.", and they lamented that "the outstanding feature of this terminology is perhaps its ambiguity". (*ibid*, p. 3-4). That would seem to be the understatement of the year. At any rate, no political scientist would appear to have mastered all these methods, and not all have agreed that some of them are proper in the field of political science. All political scientists show, however, their individual predilection for methods selected for their propriety in the study of particular interests and, to be really outstanding, have to show great ability in handling interdisciplinary skills. No wonder, therefore, that the first professor of political science in the University of Cambridge remarked in his inaugural lecture in 1928 "that many of his hearers regarded the subject of his chair as 'certainly nebulous, probably dubious and possibly disputatious'". (W. A. Robson, *The University Teaching of Social Sciences: Political Science*, UNESCO, 1954, p. 16).

Not only to the uninitiate, then, would it seem that political scientists cannot even agree upon the scope or set limits to their alleged discipline, or indeed to the object of its study. Indeed, for Maurice Cowling of Jesus College at Cambridge, political science as an academic discipline is non-existent. "Political Science", he writes (*The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, Cambridge, 1963, pp. 209-210—cf. p. 1ff) "the taking thought to

deal with each situation by hypothesis and experiment", he calls it, "is . . . in an academic setting, an impossibility. In an academic setting," he went on, "hypotheses are tools for the further elucidation of a subject matter and they have no relevance to anything else. Political explanation exists here as philosophy and history, and nothing else. Political science, sociology, social administration, international relations, criminology, comparative institutions and comparative government, when looked at critically, dissolve into these two disciplines: and if they do not, they have not been looked at critically enough." And, he goes on, "The only political science, in this sense, goes on in the world of practice and the only political scientists are ministers and members of parliament, ambassadors and heads of department, kings, princes, citizens and revolutionaries who are, like historians, physicists and philosophers, responsible for the subject matter on which they work. Professors of Political Science", he added, "who want to engage in political practice (by standing for Parliament, writing in newspapers, advising governments or joining the City Council) are free to do so. But they are, so far as they do this, abandoning their academic function for a practical political one. To do so may, if they are lucky, help them to illuminate the academic subject matter. But the only rational action to which scholars, as scholars, are committed, the only moral action to which they are commanded and the only 'social responsibility' to which their professional position compels them, is to use their energies in order to explain in its full diversity as much as they can of the nature of the world in which they live."

This is, perhaps, a view which would be agreeable to many. But Dr. Cowling is to my mind not entirely convincing. The distinction between the scholar and the practitioner is not an absolute one, as he at least suggests, but moreover explanation, as he, in fact, says (p. 210) "is a form of action". It is never explanation for its own sake, but for some purpose; and to say that one explains for academic reasons is nonsense, or at any rate it confuses the method with the object. Explanation, I would argue, comes about when a question becomes significant, and the kind of question asked by political scientists is always subjective to the age and place in which it is put. But secondly it it always asked for a purpose. Thus one may ask "How does the constitution of, let us say, Britain, or the U.N. work?" not simply with a view to explaining its parts, but in order to exercise judgement; for some end. Does it work properly, efficiently, is it satisfactory in carrying out the purpose for which it came into being? And willy nilly, implicitly or explicitly, the scholar will ask what may be done to it to make it serve its purpose better? Or whether indeed its purpose ought to be changed? Thus even academic explanation is a social and a political act. It only has force and significance, of course, if it is seen to be relevant to actual problems of life, and in the field of political science that means in practical political life. The difference between the academic political scientist and political practitioner is, then, that the first when properly so called, in contradistinction to the second, applies his mind without undue restraint of loyalty to party rules or particular political ide-

ologies, to explain particular or general problems in order to discover the truth and to serve mankind. He undertakes research, and he teaches. And teaching is never simply the passing on of information or of explanation but a process of training people to use judgement, and the use of judgement means the seeking out of criteria of right and wrong, of excellence and of inferiority. It is, in short, also a process of character formation as well as of intellectual training. Political scientists are involved, in fact, not only in explanation but also in making. They may inform official opinion, guide public opinion, and direct through widening circles through schools and professional associations and societies the attention of administrators and politicians to principles and practices which deserve rejection, modification, or acceptance, because one of these things will make the governmental and the social system more just, more efficient or more economical. Moreover, nowadays not infrequently, academic political scientists, like academic economists, are formally called in to provide professional or technical advice to government departments or international specialised agencies, or they are employed to undertake special surveys and compile official reports. In all this activity they are involved in an increasing responsibility in policy formulation and creating a consensus of opinion on vital matters in national and international affairs. Thus Charles Merriam said with some truth some forty years ago that (*New Aspects of Politics*, University of Chicago, 1925), political scientists are more than concerned with the methodology and scope of social research, they are concerned with social formation or as some would put it, 'social engineering'; and he added that "We might make the coming generation aristocrats, democrats, communists, nationalists, or internationalists at will, assuming that we were prepared to devote the necessary time and patience to the construction of the machinery for the purpose of social and political education". (p. 203). Nor does he mean only secondary and tertiary education, but the constant re-education of the citizens (p. 206). "The public opinion", he says, "that rests chiefly upon tradition and custom, or upon transparent rationalisations of interest, or upon ignorance of fundamental relations between economic and social interests and political action can no longer be reckoned as an adequate basis for a government". (p. 209). He had in mind then an applied science of politics and of government, just as, indeed, had Aristotle.

In his views, though, Prof. Merriam over-emphasises perhaps the role of the political scientists for, as Aristotle was the first to point out, the manners and minds of men are formed by three factors, nature, habit and rationality (*Politics*, Bk. VII, para. 1332b), and it is not easy, as all political and social studies testify, to bring these three determinants of action into harmony with each other. This indeed is the central problem of the political scientist.

Nor indeed, as a further comment upon Prof. Merriam's argument, is the political scientist a sovereign educator, for "It is", Maurice Cowling wrote, "the whole of the education and the whole of a religion that a man has, not just his reflective philosophy, which determines what part he sees

of the world and what he will think it necessary to do in it", (p. 208), and in this sense neither the academic political scientist nor the practitioner of scientific politics has full control of his material. But the difficulties of the political scientist do not stop there. For it should be transparently clear that the political scientist is himself a creature of nature, habit and rationality, and though his natural self may be under a wide measure of command because of disciplined and civilised habits and because of the intense individualism which springs from the cultivation of a questioning and rational approach to the problems of life, yet his mind and nature will still be profoundly affected by the social and intellectual community in which he lives. And in that context too, what work he does will reflect at least a compromise between his free will and the expectations or demands of his society. Thus it is that there are national schools of political science: Prof. Hans Morgenthau argues that American departments of political science "were established . . . not for the purpose of theoretical understanding, let alone philosophical speculation, but primarily for meeting the practical exigencies of the day", that is to provide administrators, and to train practical politicians. This, he said, was the limit of expectation placed upon American colleges and universities in an age which cherished only the utilitarian (Dilemmas, pp. 9ff.). On the other hand, German political science, it is sometimes claimed, is expressive of the traditions of German legal science, and French of the Roman legal tradition; and in the Soviet Union, under the impact of Marxism, "political science" (reports the UNESCO Survey) "is merely a secondary aspect of sociology which is centred in political economy". (pp. 7-8).

Political scientists, then, are subject to environmental factors which not only affect directly their intellectual freedom, as in totalitarian states, but which more subtly condition their thinking according to their degree of involvement in religious, political, or other movements and in their cultural environment, and also according to what might be called the interdisciplinary pressures which are current from time to time. Among these influences from other branches of learning at present would clearly be listed (1) demographic and ecological studies in a period of tremendous human population growth; (2) sociological studies of populations in areas of rapid economic change when agricultural science and industrialisation are introduced or where a continuing technological revolution is changing industrial, economic and administrative patterns, and consequently political behaviour; (3) military science, because the consequences for national politics and international relations of modern military weapons are so great; (4) economics, because, for example, the consequences in domestic politics of the attainment of the Welfare State and in international politics of the growing gap between States with affluent societies and those with struggling economies, urgently call for remedial steps by national governments and international agencies; and (5) anthropology, (taken in the widest sense of the Oxford English Dictionary as the 'Whole science of man'; and the 'physiological and psychological science of man') because, *inter alia*, the strict egalitarian principles

of 18th century European rationalist political theory have so generally been made the basis for political action when in fact differences between, on the one hand primitive societies and on the other 'advanced' societies and also amongst advanced societies as such, makes political egalitarianism impractical whether it is applied to individuals or to states. Besides it is evidently impossible to introduce it in some multi-racial states without actually introducing injustices which may be more sharply felt than the old ones. Consequently, the political and administrative machinery of government and also legal systems have to be carefully appraised and modified to avoid renewed or new tensions in modern states and between them. Sixthly, then, political science is also influenced by administration and legal science. Even in advanced societies, then, cultural heritages and what may be called inherent differentiating factors such as racial, religious, and geopolitical, as well as ideological considerations, control the processes of question and answer, of the interpretation of legal and moral rules, and of social and political analyses made by political scientists.

Any such listing of influences to which political scientists are subjected, such as I have just attempted, emphasises the fact that their subjectivity is broadly of two kinds: (1) they are themselves members of diverse societies, and their studies tend to reflect their inheritances as well as sometimes differing environmental problems; but (2) they live at present in a revolutionary age when much of their inheritance seems irrelevant to an understanding of their own times, or to salvation from fearful dangers foreseen in the future. Where political scientists perceive these antagonistic influences the order of questions which they ask undergoes profound changes, and at the same time a profound scepticism moves many of them to perhaps an extreme reliance upon empirical testing so that political science withdraws itself from theoretical exploration and speculative thinking and becomes for some at any rate a new dismal science concerned with the collection of data and its systematic arrangement, such as is indulged in by some scholars specialising for example, in the statistical analyses of elections. Or conversely the same disillusionment with reflective theory and established moral resources leads to the mathematical or formulative projection of ameliorative and allegedly practical programs of elective, political and administrative organisation without sufficiently taking into account that man's social behaviour and exercise of political choice rarely conforms to the objects of such programs. Thus some political scientists, to quote Morgenthau (op.cit. pg. 19), "retreat ever more from contact with the empirical world into a realm of self-sufficient abstractions". This fault has been "aptly called", he says, the "new scholasticism" and what it does is to dissolve "the substance of knowledge into the processes of knowing; . . . to think about how to think, and to conceptualise about concepts". It means "regressing ever further from empirical reality until" the patient (as one feels obliged to call this type of scholar) "finds the logical consummation of his endeavours in mathematical symbols and other formal relations . . . The apparent precision of his

categories" Morgenthau then says, "tends to go hand in hand with an often shocking imprecision of his vestigial substantive thought; for, to the extent that objective reality demands qualitative evaluation, formalism either misses the point altogether or else distorts it".

It is not surprising indeed, that many scholars, shocked out of the security given by traditions and beliefs which have been undermined, and disillusioned about their ability to rest their learning upon sure religious or philosophical foundations, should either over-emphasise the empirical, or withdraw from both traditional speculation and empirical verification and escape into the exercise of what they might call pure *avant garde* rationalism. But the most rewarding part of modern political science is the development of empirical testing to prove the soundness of classical theories and application of the results to the reformulation of ideas in all fields of knowledge about mankind in order to smooth the path of adaptation to new orders of existence. Ideas and practice are therefore brought continually into a renewed and approximately harmonious relationship.

I am reminded in this of the frustration which Bishop John Robinson reports is felt by many Christians whose life of prayer and devotion is purely formal because their religious life is identified with a physical place (the church) and with a spiritual place (which is not of this world); and of his injunction that religion is a way of living here and now and prayer and devotion is performed serving ones fellows in accordance with ones faith in God. ('Honest to God' by J. A. T. Robinson. S.C.M. Press, 1963). Theology and exegesis are indeed sharing the shocks of our time which is revolutionising our knowledge of things and altering our methods of ascertaining the truth for our times in all fields of learning. And the fundamentally interesting thing is not the scholastic aberrations which ensue, but the reformulation of the old and perhaps its evolutionary development, with at times some discarding of what is now not credible or needed and with some addition of knowledge and emphasis of what is now needed, in a way which revitalises faith and points to exciting prospects for research, planning and development. In effect, in the social sciences as in theology and the experimental sciences, formalism whether in theory or practice is taking hard knocks, and theory and practice are being wedded together in action. Just as, then, religion is showing a tendency to come out of the pulpits into the streets so even more generally the political scientist is coming out of his ivory tower to try his rationalism in the hard school of practical affairs. And it would surely be wrong to accuse them of sacrificing political objectivity in doing so, for apart from the fact that experience may improve their objectivity it would be paradoxical to demand a self-denying ordinance from those who have devoted the most serious study to political life and institutions. It suffices only to say that of course the political scientist should recognise his special responsibility in this matter, since, in the words of Professor R. H. Brookes of Wellington, "Precisely because he studies the subject

seriously, people may give some weight to his remarks". Thus "to justify their attention, he must not merely achieve an understanding of the system he's criticising; he must also cultivate adequate standards of criticism", must draw, indeed, upon the masterpieces of political theory and make articulate anew "the assumptions on which alternative political systems may be based, thereby challenging one to clarify, and perhaps to modify, the basic assumptions underlying . . . (other) . . . political preferences". (R. H. Brooks, *The Art of the Possible*, Inaugural Address, The Victoria University of Wellington, 1962, pg. 12.).

Now, what we have established thus far in this lecture, is (1) that the political scientist is subjective to his environment, and that (2) he ought not to do his work esconced in an ivory tower, and that in fact he seems increasingly to work as one who does have in view the application of his adumbrations to real situations. He is then, no different from the physicists, chemists and others who also have to work from existant theories of energy and matter, and who are concerned with the advance of scientific knowledge for practical ends. Some have concluded in consequence that political scientists should go about their work in the same way. But the attempts of those who think of political science in the same terms as natural science have lead to some unhappy results.

This one may illustrate perhaps by quoting from the work of one of the most renowned of modern social scientists, Harold D. Lasswell, and considering what in fact happened to him. "One aspect of the task of the systematic student of politics", he wrote, "is to *describe* political behaviour in those social situations which recur with sufficient frequency to make *prediction* useful as a preliminary to *control*". (Quoted in 'Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics', Ed. H. J. Storing, New York, 1962, pg. 227, by R. Horwitz). In applying a lifetime of study to this intention Lasswell turned his back formally upon political philosophy as, to quote his words, "metaphysical speculation in terms of abstractions hopelessly removed from empirical observation and control". (quoted from Lasswell, 'Power and Society', p. x, Storing, op. cit. p. 303). For him, in fact political philosophy was equivalent to ideology, the classical theorists having generally, he argued, established doctrines in justification of their own political preferences. To replace such unscientific formulations Lasswell strove to contribute towards the formulation of an all-encompassing scientific political theory according to which all social structures and the resultant political philosophies could be understood (ibid. p. 228f.). Yet Lasswell himself was dedicated to a political ideal: he was a man "deeply intent on making Democracy a working institution" (Lasswell: *The Analysis of Political Behaviour*, p. vii, London, 1951), and this confusion left his thought, in the words of Ralph Horwitz, "impaled on the horns of an irresolvable dilemma". His science became manipulative rather than descriptive, it was put to the service of propaganda rather than simply to a cool analysis of social behaviour, and his careless regard for political philosophy as a discipline which had formed even his preference seems to

have left him unaware that he had become, master propagandist though he was, the victim of a subtler propaganda than he could invent. (Storing, p. 303f.)

From the point of view of converting political studies into a quasi-exact science, then, or of establishing model constructs as criteria by which to judge real social situations and their political consequences Lasswell was a failure. But in other ways he, and a whole generation of behavioural scholars have in fact made it possible for political analysis to reach new depths and to turn it to good purpose in the practical assessment of social situations by political parties and departments of state. They did this by adding a new perspective to census-taking, by perfecting methods of opinion analysis, and behaviour analysis in authority structures of both informal and formal kinds, as in social clubs, in trade unions, in military forces, and in state bureaucracies. The results have sometimes been startling, as for instance to prove wrong by empirical verification Marxist prophecies of the increasing proletarianisation of capitalist society. For society in advanced industrialised countries develops highly elaborate authority structures which distribute wealth and political power in ways unforeseen by Marx, and which leads in fact to a diminishment of the social category which Marx identified with the use of the word mass, to such a point indeed that the real mass lies above it. (Cf. R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, London 1959). Another vital example would do here. It has been a trait of many political theorists, prominently amongst them in our own time, the Marxists, to suppose that by a perfectly just redistribution of wealth and power classes would disappear and therefore the tensions between them would disappear also, so that in due time the whole world would dwell in peace as all its peoples were habituated to communist norms of social justice. But modern behavioural research unhappily proves Aristotle right. It is not simply economic factors which cause social differences, and tensions between classes, and violence in society. Authority relationships which even communist society could not eliminate cause it too; and so do a whole pandoras box of human prejudices arising from group relationships (e.g. as between peoples of different physiological type and skin colour). And though it is true that a good deal of research has traced the causes of particular prejudices and made it possible to eliminate them by legislation and education, yet the situations out of which prejudice involuntarily arises, and which can be exploited by political manipulators, are not always predictable and occur in such variety that a general control is impossible of achievement.

The behavioralists have therefore served us well in certain directions.

Not least is challenging many accepted views with regard to the traditionally most important part of political studies, namely institutions and administrative structures. It was often the case especially perhaps in countries governed in the British tradition, to suppose that administrative structures were a-political or at any rate were a

negative factor in the implementation of political policies. One does not have far to seek in history to prove this assumption wrong, but still too many scholars are content with descriptive analysis based upon constitutional documents or similar evidence, and give too much credence to the assumption that bureaucrats, including civil servants, are not part of an over-all authority structure (what the sociologists call an imperatively co-ordinated association), extending from the highest political or decision-making offices down to the daily routines of the humblest members of society. Behavioural studies have proved that authority roles where-ever exercised in a social group such as one may take a nation-state to be, have social and political content as well as administrative meaning. That is to say, that while the formal legal organisation of institutions does institutionalize the character of human behaviour and impose differential functional relationships upon people who categorise each other according to place and role in the formal authority hierarchy, at the same time, informal human behaviour and individual or class expectations or desires deriving sometimes from sources outside the functional roles involved, create tensions within institutions, and bring about organic changes in them, which make even the most carefully written constitutions inadequate tools of political analysis. A classic example would be the constitutions of the U.S.S.R. and of the C.P.S.U., but it affects all institutions. (Vide S. K. Bailey, 'New Research Frontiers of Interest to Legislators and Administrators' in *Research Frontiers, Research Frontiers in Politics and Government*, Brookings Institution, 1955, pg. 13 ff.) As a consequence the conventional use of words like 'executive', 'legislature', 'political party' and 'bureaucracy' in the sense of formal categories which enable scholars to indulge in the comparative analysis of governments by comparing their formal constitutions is now recognised to be unscientific. An example would be the highly complex considerations which apply to the comparison of ministerial cabinets in British Commonwealth states, for even the most tentative probing must lead one to assume that they are all different kinds of organisms differently articulated to state departments, and legislatures, and to party caucuses; and equally important perhaps, are differently regarded by the people at large whom they govern. Thus new criteria of comparison, if comparison there must be, must be found. (Vide: D. B. Truman, *The Impact on Political Science of the Revolution in the Behavioural Sciences*, in *Research Frontiers*, op. cit. Chapter 8.) Nor is this exercise irrelevant, for in a world in which inter-governmental co-operation and even supra-national institutions are of increasing importance, the provision of properly trained personnel and the development of a more general understanding of the processes of decision-making and execution are of very great importance. Not only in national governments, but in international organisations, for it becomes clearer that a nominally a-political secretariat or international civil service, as in the U.N., does become what its creators so often naively suppose it won't become, namely, a *positive* force in the implementation of policies implicitly as well as explicitly written into

the charter or treaty by which the organisation is set up. (*Vide*, UNESCO Report on National Administration and International Organisation, A Comparative Survey of Fourteen Countries, Brussels, 1951.)

I cannot canvass here, with any hope of success the new approaches which are being made, and the new principles which are being established, in the study of politics and government. Suffice it so say that in many ways political scientists are making new maps as significantly different from the old as the geographical charts of the world which

followed the discovery that the earth was a globe and not flat. And their new maps are becoming as complex and as differentiated as the geographer's and geologists' maps. And so they must, for they deal with the whole man, in his whole environment and with all kinds of men in their kinds of environment. Thus there are many specialists going under the general name of political scientists, and it is not given to a general practitioner, or indeed even to a specialist of one branch of the science, to be able to move with equal facility through all fields of learning and research in this great subject.