

Perspectives about the Difference in the Relevance of American and European Political Science

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INTRODUCTION

Issues about the relevance of political science have recently been raised, both within the discipline and from the world outside academia (Stoker, Peters, and Pierre 2015; Kristof 2014). To some extent, this discussion has been triggered by the attack from the Republican Party in the US Congress against funding for political science by the National Science Foundation. One of the arguments put forward for cutting funding for political science is that, unlike cancer research, advancement of our knowledge of how the political system works cannot save lives. Seen from a European perspective, a puzzling feature of this debate is why our esteemed American colleagues have not been able to successfully counter this attack which has been directed, not only at funding, but at the very external legitimacy of the discipline. Why have there not been more effective arguments showing that the discipline has a huge relevance, not least when it comes to matters of life and death (Holmberg and Rothstein 2012)? After all, American political science is not just part of the global discipline of political science; it dominates that discipline—in terms of prestige, number of leading scholars, highly ranked journals, and renowned university departments.

In this essay I will discuss this from my position as a political scientist from one of the Nordic countries. My views below are not built on any systematic collection of data but solely on some personal observations and experiences. My argument in short is that there are four overlooked but potentially important institutional differences between American and European political science that may have implications for the issue of relevance understood as the contributions the discipline can offer the public debate about public policy. They are: the relation to education in law, the relation to public administration, the relation between political theory/philosophy and empirical research within the discipline and, lastly, the institutionalization of intellectual exchange.

THE DRAIN TO LAW SCHOOLS

During the spring semester in 2006, I was invited to serve as visiting professor at Harvard University, which included teaching a class of upper-level undergraduates. My course was titled “Corruption, Social Trust and Human Well-Being in a Comparative Perspective.” I had never taught outside the Scandinavian countries before so this was a new experience to me, not least the “shopping week” when students went to

different introductory lectures and then decided which courses to take—a practice that I had no experience with, but which I found quite compatible with how I perceived the consumerist ideology in the United States. Eventually, I ended up with 18 students, most of them seniors. I enjoyed teaching this class immensely. The students were (of course) very smart and eloquent but also very engaged in the course. My plan for lecturing soon fell apart and the class turned itself into a full-fledged seminar in which the students really spoke their minds and the discussions often continued in the cafeteria long after class had ended.

At the end of the course, the students invited me to an informal gathering and because they were mostly seniors I took the opportunity to ask how many of them were planning to pursue a PhD in political science. As it turned out, I was in for one of the biggest surprises in my professional career. Surprised, the students looked at me and I was told that such an idea was not at all what they had in mind for their future careers. Several of them then asked me why I had asked them such a strange question. Well, I said, this would be a very common thing for students like them in my part of the world to do. They were all very engaged in the topics of the course and had accepted my main message that corruption and others forms of dysfunctional government institutions had a detrimental effect on social trust and also for almost all measures of human well-being. For students like these in the Nordic countries, a career in political science (or some other social science) research would be both an obvious and quite attractive option, not least for getting a position from where one could influence policy. But no, not one of the 15 or so seniors had thought about becoming a political scientist. And so, I asked them what they planned to do instead. About half of them wanted to work for some international NGO or organization that is in the business of “saving the world.” The other half planned to apply to law school. My jaw dropped for the second time that evening. Why law school? Knowing how engaged these students were in the policy issues we had discussed during the course, this was completely inexplicable to me. Of course, my first question was if this was because of the money they could earn practicing law in the US. But no, these students were not in it for the money. Instead, they explained to me that they really wanted to work in an area where they could influence policy on the issues we had been discussing during the course, and for this a law degree was the

right thing. Again, I was completely surprised since law in the Nordic countries is a career you would go into if you do not want to influence policy or be seen as having a partisan or policy agenda. The law profession, with some minor exceptions, is thought of as a very technical, non-political, and non-partisan business. There are very few people with law degrees in Parliaments in the Nordic countries and while judicial review formally exists, it is very seldom used by the courts. Judges in particular but also lawyers are seen, and want to be seen, as impartial, non-partisan judicial technocrats, not as policy advocates. If I would ask 100 Swedish political scientists to name the President of the Swedish Supreme Court, my experience is that maybe one would know. However, quite a number

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of my colleagues would know the name of the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court and they can often name a couple of the other Supreme Court judges, too.

This little story is meant to illustrate my first point about the difference between the relevance of political science in the United States and in most of Europe and especially in the Nordic countries. Namely that, comparatively speaking, American political science is losing a huge number of young talented people, who would likely use their future scholarly knowledge for policy relevant issues, to law schools. In the Nordic countries, many of the same type of students that I had in this class would become political scientists and many of them would either be engaged in policy issues and or they would make sure that their research had policy relevance. Since my semester at Harvard, I have spoken to quite a number of colleagues at US universities about this issue and my stark impression is that my experience was not unique. On the contrary this is a problem “for real” in American political science. I can add that while I was very impressed by the undergraduate students at Harvard, I could not say the same about the majority of the graduate students. At the seminars I attended, many of them came across as quite “nerdy” people that had honed in on some quite technical methodological specialty that was miles away from anything where one could find any policy relevance. My impression was also that many of them felt as if they had been forced to “enlist” to a specific theoretical approach that they were not supposed to question. Six years later, when spending a semester at Stanford, I had very much the same experience when attending a graduate seminar in comparative politics.

What are the consequences of this drain of young talent with policy ambitions? My impression is that an argument often heard from colleagues at US universities, but not so much from colleagues in Europe, is that “I am doing basic, not applied, research.” This is an argument I have come to think of as maybe having some relevance in natural science, but not so much in social science. One argument for this relates to the three Nobel Laureates that are closest to (or in one case within) the political science discipline, namely John Nash, Douglass C.

North, and Elinor Ostrom. All of them started out with quite applied questions. Nash—how to avoid a nuclear war between the super-powers? North, asking why some countries are so much richer than others? And Ostrom, asking why some local groups manage to establish institutions that preserve the natural resources they are dependent on, while others fail to do so? From what I know, Nash did not get the Nobel Prize for his empirical research but North and Ostrom did. While stellar scholars, “methodological rigor” as it is now understood and taught at most graduate program at the leading US universities, was not their main thing. Instead, they started out from real world and very “applied” problems, used a variety of methodological approaches, and were not intellectually

enslaved by some theoretical approach they had been enlisted to as PhD students.

THE IRON WALL I: POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN AMERICA

In addition to the drain to law schools, my impression is that for the relevance question, the US differs from Europe in general and from the Nordic countries in particular in two other respects. These are what I would call the two “iron walls” in American political science. One of these is between empirical political science and political theory, the other is between the discipline as a whole and public administration. In both cases, while there are marked separations in Europe as well, they are not that “cast in stone” as seems to be the case in the US. In the Nordic countries, public administration at most universities is an integrated subfield of the political science discipline and thus not a separate academic field with separate schools, academic careers, and training. A case in point is the newly published *Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics* that contains no less than 10 chapters about the public administration in the country (Pierre 2015). This is important for the obvious reason that, if we are interested in what the political system actually can do to improve people’s lives, this is usually done through a public administration lens. It is the public administration that directly or indirectly, provides (or does not succeed in providing) personal safety, the rule of law, economic security, and civil liberties. In most countries, it is also public administration that provides (and/or regulates the providers) of health care, basic education, social insurance, and various forms of infrastructure. If the relevance of the discipline is related to the wellbeing of the people governed by the political system, excluding issues about how the public administration is organized and operates must have negative implications for how relevant the research can be. Just to take one example, most political scientists believe that political legitimacy is a central goal for a how a policy is organized. And most also believe that democratic rights are the central

factor for establishing political legitimacy. Empirically, this turns out not to be the case. There are now four studies based on large comparative survey data showing that when people make up their mind whether or not they perceive their government is legitimate, issues related to the public administration such as the rule of law, control of corruption and government effectiveness are more important for them than are democratic rights (Gilley 2009; Gjefsen 2012; Linde and Dahlberg 2016; Dahlberg and Holmberg 2015). The same effect can be seen for the support of social and welfare state policies. As shown by Svallfors (2013), a person in Europe with a leftist ideological orientation but who in the survey reports that he or she believes that the public administration of the system of taxation or public health care is incompetent or unfair, will state a preference for less public spending and lower taxes. However,

the invasions but failed completely in building (or re-building) state capacity, and there is much that suggests that the lack of development as well as the terrorism coming out of these countries today is due to this failure (Fukuyama 2014a). Moreover, Norris (2015) has shown that one requirement for establishing integrity in elections is a competent, professional, unbiased administration that can be entrusted with this complicated administrative task. One could say that excluding public administration from understanding how the political system operates is to cut off from the discipline these areas where most of the important action for establishing political legitimacy and delivering human wellbeing takes place. And, if we believe that research that has implications for political legitimacy and human well-being is also of high relevance, the separation of public administration issues from the discipline must

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the same type of person who in the survey states that these parts of the public administration are competent and act in a fair manner will also support higher public spending and state a willingness to pay higher taxes. While this point (to some extent) was made by Theda Skocpol (1992) in the “Bringing the State In” approach launched in the mid-1980s, despite all its impressive achievements, it failed to bring the public administration perspective into American political science.

Public administration issues seem to be particularly important for developing countries. In order to succeed in improving human wellbeing, it seems more important for developing countries to secure a high level of government quality (aka state capacity) than establishing electoral democracy (Rothstein 2011; Fukuyama 2014a). While the correlations between almost all standard measures of human well-being (infant mortality, percentage of children in severe poverty, life satisfaction, etc.) and measures of quality of government/state capacity are high and significant, the correlations with a measure of the level of democracy is either null or very small (Holmberg and Rothstein 2014; Rothstein and Holmberg 2014). As shown by Amartya Sen, we have to face the fact that autocratic communist China now outperforms liberal democratic India on every standard measure of human well-being (Sen 2011). There is much suggesting that this can be explained by the way the Chinese have managed to organize their public administration for simultaneously securing competence and ideological coherence (Rothstein 2015a; Ahlers and Schubert 2011). As argued by Fukuyama, in development research, almost all political scientists have focused on what explains democratization while very few have paid any attention to issues about how to build state capacity—that is, how to secure a reasonably competent, incorrupt, and impartial public administration (Fukuyama 2014b; Rothstein and Tannenber 2015). The latter seems in fact much more difficult to accomplish than organizing democratic elections. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the US managed to establish reasonably legitimate elections after

be a problem.¹ It is probably not a coincidence that the current *primus inter pares* among Nordic political scientists—Johan P. Olsen at the University of Oslo—is by and large a public administration scholar and also a researcher who has had a huge policy influence in the Nordic countries, not least as a leading member of two of the four mega-research projects carried out during the last three decades known as the “power and democracy” investigations (Elmgren and Götz 2013). Leading political scientists and political philosophers in Europe also publish books about how to increase the policy impact from our discipline (Bastow, Dunleavy, and Tinkler 2014; Wolff 2011).

IRON WALL II: THE ISOLATION OF POLITICAL THEORY IN AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE

It is my impression that the field of political theory is more separated and isolated from empirical political science in the US than in Europe and definitively so in the Nordic countries. While harboring in the same formal departments, political theorists seldom interact with empirical researchers in, for example, comparative politics. This isolation is also institutionalized in the way sections and panels are constructed at the major American conferences. I must have been to more than 200 such conference panels over the years but I cannot remember a single discussion taking part between a political theorist and a comparative political scientist. Since my fields were welfare state and social policies, social capital, and lately corruption and the quality of government, I have always found this division very strange and have tried to surpass it in my own writing (Rothstein 1998; 2005). For example, social and welfare policy concern normative issues about social justice and what our obligations are to less fortunate citizens. In a way, much of what political theory, from Aristotle to Rawls, is about concerns a quite simple question, namely what ought the state to do? Or framed differently, what is our own responsibility as citizens and what should we have the right to claim

as support from the collective? Empirical research concerns very much what the state can do in these areas. What type of policies can gain popular support, which type of policies can be implemented without causing bureaucratic nightmare or damage to the economy? Obviously, none of these questions can, or should, be answered separately if one wants to be relevant to the public debate or public policy. Arguing that the state ought to do something that empirical research shows it cannot do, or showing that the state can do something that, from an ethical perspective, it should not do, will not give you any leverage when it comes to relevance. But this is how much of political theory and empirical research about the welfare state and social policy has been conducted in American political science. As I have argued elsewhere, both political theory and empirical research are being handicapped by the institutionalization of this “iron wall” (Rothstein 2015b). Political theorists, for example, can propose policies for increased social justice that from empirical research are known to lead to such bureaucratic nightmares that the result would be the creation of a political majority against policies for increased social justice.

The same problem impedes research about corruption. The lack of a clear, normative foundation of the concept of corruption has seriously hurt the relevance of this research. For example, the standard definition of corruption in empirical research is some variant of “abuse of public power for private gain.” This is a normatively empty and technocratic definition because what should count as “abuse” is not defined. As a result, this has invited all sorts of cultural relativism in this area of study because what is counted as “abuse” in Denmark differs from what this is in Nigeria. This difference turns out

explanation could be how the main conferences are organized. As is well known, the APSA Annual Meeting as well as the regional conferences are dominated by short (about 90 minutes) panels in which four or five paper givers and one or two discussants have to share the time. Usually, the panels are organized by scholars who think alike and have a very common approach and the ambition is not so much intellectual discussion but instead to market their common approach. Very little time is given to each paper, and in many cases there is no time for questions from the audience. This way of organizing intellectual exchange does not promote discussions between people from different parts of the discipline, instead what is promoted is “group think” and a market-based approach to intellectual work. The main political science conference in Europe has been the Joint Session of Workshops that has been organized by the European Consortium for Political Research every year since 1973. At these conferences, the operative logic is very different from the American style. The workshops are organized around themes, which are often problem and policy oriented, thus promoting relevance in the above-mentioned sense. The workshops consist of about 15 to 20 participants and last for four whole days implying that each paper is given about an hour. This mode of organizing intellectual exchange was set-up by leading European scholars such as Hans Daalder and Stein Rokkan, as a reaction to the American short panel style that they found too superficial. The workshop style invites longer and more thorough discussions of each contribution which can, in my experience, work to break down barriers between different approaches. Scholars with different methodological and

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empirically not to be the case but the damage is already done because the norm that is transgressed when we can talk about abuse of a position of public power is not specified (Rothstein 2014). It is like stating that gender equality is also respected in Saudi Arabia, they just happen to have a somewhat different idea of what this is. In sum, it is my impression that empirical political scientists in the US are more afraid of being seen as “normative,” compared to their European colleagues. It is probably not a coincidence that it is political theorists working in Europe, for example; Brian Barry, Robert Goodin, Cathrine Holst, and David Miller that have succeeded in combining political philosophy with insights and results from empirical research. My impression is that too many political theorists in the US are content with a role more like museum curators polishing their favorite ancient political philosopher.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE

There may be many reasons for the differences between how political science works in the US and in Europe. One potential

theoretical approaches are together for a week to discuss research around a specific theme and this makes it more difficult to establish the type of “iron walls” mentioned above.

SUMMARY

Are there differences when it comes to relevance between American and European political science? My tentative answer is yes, and one of my arguments is the failure of our American colleagues to fend off the attack launched from the US Congress on funding for political science research. There can, of course, be a myriad of explanations for this, for example historical legacies, the role of the OECD in Europe, and the demand for the European Union’s different research funding operations for dissemination of research results. However, in this essay I have pointed at four possible internal institutional differences, namely what I called the “drain to law school” of students who are interested in having policy influence and the two iron walls to public administration and political theory which according to my impressions are more profound and difficult to climb over in the US than is the case in the

European part of the discipline. In addition, I have pointed to the differences in how the main conferences in the discipline are organized. Admittedly my reasoning is, for the most part, built on personal impressions and can only serve as a starting point for future analyses and discussions. ■

NOTE

1. In all likelihood, this division has also been detrimental for public administration research in the US but that is for another essay.

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