

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Power, politics, and the development of political science in the Americas

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Keywords: History of political science; Political science and politics; Knowledge and power; Sociology of the social sciences; North America; South America

Social scientists tend to think about their disciplines as the objective analysis of society. However, numerous critical theorists such as Edward Said, Max Horkheimer, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Herbert Marcuse, as well as interpretativists and reflexivists (Jackson 2011; Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Flick 2007) have challenged the notion that knowledge production is politically neutral and argued that, in fact, it is a key component of the broader social and political relations in which it occurs. By taking part in the production of knowledge on society, social scientists participate in the production, legitimization or critique of the social order, social hierarchies, power relations, and political regimes.

Several empirical, contemporary phenomena illustrate this idea, and make it particularly topical. Economics notoriously plays a key role in grounding the monetary policies implemented by central banks and the International Monetary Fund (Chwieroth 2010). Social scientists are regularly enrolled by political actors to help design institutions, policies, or electoral programs related to their field of expertise – for example, promoters of European institutions have heavily relied on social sciences to legitimate the integration process (Aldrin 2010; Bailleux 2013; Boncourt 2019). When not seen as a tool, social sciences are perceived as a threat: some increasingly authoritarian regimes like Erdogan’s Turkey and Orban’s Hungary have been taking concrete measures to thwart the development of these disciplines (Paternotte and Verloo 2020).

Multiple questions arise from these examples: what is, concretely, the relationship between the development of the social sciences and the emergence of critical or legitimizing discourses on the social and political order? How do social and political contexts and actors influence the activity of social scientists? Why are some disciplines more heavily enrolled by established powers or movements critical of such powers at a given time? What are the profiles and trajectories of the scholars who get involved in the production of legitimizing or critical intellectual tools? What concrete forms do these tools take, from scientific ideas (paradigms, methods, arguments, etc.) to policy instruments (surveys, data banks, etc.)? This special issue contributes to answering these questions by focusing on the case of political science in the Americas.

A discipline *par excellence* concerned with producing narratives on power relations, political science offers an interesting case study for observing the interplay between the development of the social sciences and the production of the social and political order (Ravecca 2019). The articles gathered in this special issue explore how politics and power dynamics affect political science and vice versa. They focus on the relationship between political regimes, contexts, and events on the one hand, and the academic field and the knowledge it produces on the other hand.

Embedding the study of social science within power relations

The global community of political scientists has embarked on numerous debates about ‘the state of the discipline’ (King, Lehman, and Nie 2009; Boncourt, Engeli, and Garzia 2020). The topics addressed include the intellectual structure of political science – its specificity and relationship to other social sciences (Trent 2012); the problem of hyper-specialization (Trent 2014); the “hegemony” of rational choice theory and its consequences (Amadae 2016; Monroe 2005; Green and Shapiro 1996; Shapiro 2005); the quantitative/qualitative divide (Pion-Berlin and Cleary 2005; Kasza 2005); and the marginalization of certain subdisciplines, such as political theory (Brown 2002 and 2011). Other debates focus on the social and institutional structure of political science – the participation of women and minorities in the discipline (Brettschneider 1997 and 2011; Breuningand and Sanders 2007; Evans & Moulder 2011; Rocha 2016; Engeli and Mügge 2020); university departments’ internal politics in terms of academic divisions, hiring policies and career development (Monroe 2005); the increasingly tense and competitive character of the job market and funding schemes; etc. Other main issues of debate have been the relevance of the discipline and the contributions that it does, or does not, make for improving public policy and the quality of democracies (Trent 2009). As a result of the increasing political pressures for a stronger impact of the social sciences in recent years, these debates have tended to intensify (Walker 2015) and have often been fierce, as they have involved harsh conceptual critiques (Sartori 2004) as well as aggressive defenses (Laitin 2004) of the discipline.

This special issue focuses on the position of political science in relation to the field of power. To do so, it builds upon recent literature on the history and sociology of the social sciences. This literature has focused on two aspects of the phenomenon.

Building on a longstanding debate about the extent to which scientific developments are determined by internal factors (e.g. Merton 1973), external influences (e.g. Bloor 1991) or a complex combination of the two (Whitley 2000; Bourdieu 2001; Camic and Gross 2001; Camic et al. 2011), an important and growing research strand has aimed to assess the impact of political contexts, cultures, and systems – liberal democracies, colonial empires, communist regimes, postwar reconstruction, the Cold War etc. – as well as state policies on the development of the social sciences (e.g. Easton, Gunnell, and Stein 1995; Amadae 2003; Gunnell 2004; Leiras and D’Alessandro 2005; L’Estoile 2007; Mespoulet 2007; Fourcade 2009; Steinmetz 2013; Ravecca 2015, 2016; Heilbron et al. 2018). However, authors disagree about the nature and extent of this impact. Some studies have argued that political contexts have an almost mechanical impact on knowledge production. Cold War tensions, for example, have been shown to have changed the way in which American political scientists wrote about the Soviet Union (Oren 2003) and triggered the development of a specific kind of positivist rationality in the social sciences (Erickson et al. 2013). Other authors have taken a more moderate stance by analysing the influence of political actors and contexts as mediated by disciplinary structures – which, like prisms, refract external influences and adapt them to the specific logics of disciplines (Bourdieu 1993; Maton 2005) – and by the influence of intermediary actors, such as philanthropic foundations (Guilhot 2005 and 2011; Hauptmann 2012; Boncourt 2015). The influence of politics on the development of the social sciences thus depends on the disciplines and periods under study (Solovey 2012).

Another research strand has sought to assess the effects of social scientific knowledge on the development of political institutions. For example, critical and reflexivist sociologists of European integration have shown that knowledge producers (scientists, experts, consultants, lawyers, economists, etc.) played a key part in shaping the European Union, understood as a “political, legal, economic, social, cultural and philosophical phenomenon” (Vauchez 2008; Favell and Guiraudon 2009; Mudge and Vauchez 2012; Roa-Bastos and Vauchez 2019; quote in Adler-Nissen and Kropp 2015). They suggested that the social sciences of European integration had “theory effects” on the latter (Adler-Nissen and Kropp 2015) and should, therefore, be studied in their own right (Rosamond 2000; 2015).

The articles gathered in this special issue contribute to studying these two types of processes. On the one hand, they analyze the way in which the political and social sciences are “politicized” (Lagroye 2003). They highlight the instrumental role played by political actors and contexts in giving birth to and shaping the development of these disciplines, by showing how they are often constituted as stakes for political struggles and tools for the exercise of political power. On the other hand, contributions also assess the way in which disciplinary knowledge shapes politics and plays a role in reproducing unequal power relations in contemporary societies. Rather than focusing on one of these two processes, the articles show how political and scientific agendas are deeply interwoven into individual, institutional, and organizational trajectories and activities. By anchoring their analysis in the empirical study of individuals, organizations, and institutions, they highlight the extent to which actors circulate between scientific and political fields and how, therefore, the ideas, interests, agendas, and resources that they bring with them contribute to the inter-related construction of scientific and political structures.

Political science and power in the Americas: outline of the special issue

The articles gathered in this special issue offer a combination of differences and common points that serve these objectives. At the methodological level, they use a diversity of techniques and materials, ranging from archives and interviews to the quantitative analysis of journals. The combination of these methods strengthens the argument, as it highlights the multiple levels at which the interactions of political science and politics are tangible.

At the empirical level, the articles share a focus on the Americas and strike a balance between North and South American cases. This empirical focus has two virtues. On the one hand, it provides comparative contrast. Twentieth-century North America has played a key part in the institutionalization and intellectual structuring of political science. The significant financial backing offered by public and private actors from an early stage has allowed North American, and US political science in particular, to expand significantly (see Emily Hauptmann’s article) and exert a dominant influence on the international stage, not only at the scientific but also at the political level (as Emily Zerndt’s piece makes clear). By contrast, as highlighted by Paulo Ravecca’s study of Uruguayan political science, the structuring of the discipline in Latin America has been shaped by contradictory dynamics, linked in some cases to political regime changes and generally to a more peripheral position on the international cultural and scientific stage.¹

On the other hand, the combination of North American and Latin American cases is a good way to highlight the transnational circulation and diffusion processes that shape the national trajectories of political science as a discipline. As shown by Lidiane Soares Rodrigues’s study of the Brazilian case, disciplinary histories are never purely national: they are shaped by ideas and actors that travel across national borders. This is especially true on a continent where North American actors, such as philanthropic foundations, heavily intervened in the conditional funding of Latin American political science, as well as in the training of its elites.

Through these different empirical focuses, the articles all provide an analysis of the interplay between political science and power relations.

Emily Hauptmann studies the history of data sharing institutions in American political science from the 1960s. In contrast to narratives that would describe these devices as instruments for the progress of knowledge, she reconstructs the indistinctly scientific, political, and professional motives that the setting up of these institutions served, for political scientists as well as for the US government.

¹This specific history implies that in Latin America, substantive discussions about the relationship between political science and the field of power are incipient. For an overview of the literature on the history of political science in the continent, see the interview with Pablo Bulcourn in Cigales (2017). The pieces on Brazil and Uruguay of this special issue also constitute a contribution to expanding and enriching these conversations.

Emily Zerndt studies the Comparative Survey of Freedom, first published by Freedom House in 1973, and now the most widely used indicator of democracy by both academics and the US government. By analyzing the trajectories of the individuals who created the Survey, she shows that this now-dominant policy instrument had its origins in both scientific and political power struggles.

Lidiane Soares Rodrigues studies the development of political science in Brazil. Rather than narrating this story as that of a progressive 'autonomization' or 'institutionalization' of the discipline, she studies the trajectories of the first generation of Brazilian professional political scientists and discusses the extent to which these actors were 'converted' to a supposedly neutral conception of their role, as opposed to a politically engaged one, in the context of the Cold War in its Brazilian developments.

Paulo Ravecca focuses on the trajectory of political science in Uruguay. He explores the impact of the right-wing dictatorship (1973-1985) on the epistemological and ideological beliefs of Uruguayan political scientists about democracy, capitalism, and socialism. The article highlights the interplay between politics and subjectivity (particularly, political trauma) in shaping the intellectual transformations of the discipline. The transition from the embrace of Marxism to the hegemony of liberalism within academia is interpreted as an intellectual, academic, and political shift.

Taken together, these four studies show that intellectual and political imperialisms are multi-faceted processes shaped by multiple dynamics and actors. Rather than being only the fulfillment of pre-existing grand designs, they are also the incremental product of micro- and meso-level strategies, involving political as well as professional, intellectual, and individual interests.

Acknowledgments. This special issue stems from a panel organized at the 24th congress of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) held in Poznan in July 2016. The panel was organized by IPSA's 33rd Research Committee, which focuses on the study of political science as a discipline.

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