

1965

The Status of Political Theory in the Study of Politics

Jooinn Lee

University of Minnesota, Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lee, J. (1965). The Status of Political Theory in the Study of Politics. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science*, Vol. 32 No.3, 205-208.

Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol32/iss3/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

The Status of Political Theory in the Study of Politics

JOOINN LEE¹

University of Minnesota, Morris

ABSTRACT — A general consensus among political scientists during the last decade seems to indicate that political science as a discipline will have a brighter future if it is guided by an approach that is behaviorally relevant; political theory is the least significant field of political science because it is least relevant to a behavioral treatment of the discipline. In this study, the author challenges such behavioral contempt for political theory by presenting his vindications of the importance and value of political theory. Furthermore, he attempts to locate political theory in a proper and legitimate place in the study of politics.

The emergence of political behavioralism, as a central concern of political science during the course of the present century, seemed to lead to the impression that political theory had lost its importance and been dethroned.² Some scholars and students of political science even regarded political theory as an intruder from alien academic disciplines such as philosophy and history, into political science. In current political science, they contended, political theory could not meet the challenge arising on the frontiers of the study of politics. Political science in the mid-twentieth century should, therefore, depend upon more and more specialization and less and less generalization. Traditional political theory, as an aggregation of independent guiding principles of political activities is doomed to be replaced by the empirical accessibility of political phenomena. Thus, they have attempted to hatch a new political science under behavioral wings.

A few months ago, Somit and Tanenhaus (1963:941 ff.) revealed the result of a recent questionnaire on the state of American political science. According to their survey, general politics and behavioralism is more frequently cited as the most significant field (22.6 per cent of respondents), whereas political theory is more frequently rated as a field in which the least significant work is being done (32.4 per cent of respondents). This result is a startling reversal of the findings made by the Committee for the Advancement of Teaching of the American Political Science Association (1951:xv and 126 ff.) slightly over a decade ago. The committee reported, at that time, that political theory was regarded most frequently as the most important core of political science. Probably the most amazing fact is that the inversion of findings has occurred within such a short interval.

Is this trend in American political science a wholesome advancement toward its perfection? Can the con-

¹ B.A., *summa cum laude*, Yonsei University; M.A., University of North Dakota, 1958, and Ph.D., University of Illinois, 1962, in political science. Since 1961, at University of Minnesota, Morris, where he is currently Assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and advisor of the International Relations Club.

² The eclipse of political theory as a discipline has been variously described as "having entered upon a time of trouble" (Smith, 1957:734); as "decline of political theory" (Easton, 1951:36-58; and Cobban, 1953:321-37); and as "dearth of political theory" (Greaves, 1960:3).

temporary behavioral approach depending upon experimental laboratory techniques of the current century ignore the rich heritage of political theory descending from classic times? The enthusiasts of behavioralism are apt to declare that political theorists earn for themselves the appellation of political searchers of the normative, and as such, a relic of the dead past, worthy of being relegated to some forgotten limbo. Nothing would be more absurd than treating political theorists in such manner. For reckless and total denial of the merit of political theory would only lead to cutting the subject off at its very root.³ Empiricism is useful and essential in contemporary research, but without the help of nonempirical studies, such research would be full of shortcomings. Empiricism, in essence, holds that only facts are real; values are subjective, and, therefore, incapable of lending themselves to scientific treatment. Evaluation and generalization must be kept at a minimum if the empirical canons are to be followed in research.⁴ In extreme cases, the observer, in order not to violate scientific objectivity, is not allowed to take sides on issues nor permitted to make moral judgments of "what is good or bad, better or best" (Lippincott, 1950:219).

It may, then, be asked, in criticism of the empirical, whether the real consists exclusively of facts. Is it not a false conception of scientific method that facts are capable of arranging themselves spontaneously as if Engels' administration of things would occur automatically? The truth is that it is the political theorists who furnish order and meaning by systematizing ideas based on individual facts. As Friedrich (1958:188) stated, as long as politics deal with contingent matters, scienticism merely based on empiricism is not always workable. Waldo (1956:20) once pointed out that contemporary political science might be considered to be engaged in an intensive "quest for the real." To discover reality, however, it is not enough to rely exclusively on methods used in natural science. A mere accumulation of a number of scientific studies, according to Hyneman (1959:79), does

³ The fear that our universities will face a dilemma if a narrowing of the subject of politics occurs is well described by Appleby (1950:931).

⁴ The danger of relying exclusively on the scientific method is that scholars ignore not only what science has shown to be false, but also what science has not yet proved true or false, i.e., matters on which science has not yet given its verdict. Cf., Plamenatz (1960:43).

not make for science. It may be claimed that a science of politics exists when "we are convinced that we have formulated a substantial body of generalizations that fit together in a structure of knowledge."

There is a strong tendency among some contemporary political scientists to identify the subject of political science with the study of one or other of the following concepts to the exclusion of all others: power, group, process, equilibrium, action, decision making, game, role, field, etc. But it can be legitimately asked if these phenomena could be studied without political theory. As the bulk of criticisms of the classics usually comes from those who have not read them, so many who regard political theory as outmoded, do not know what it is.

The term political theory, of course, has various shades of meanings. It is used in connection with notions such as political ideology, political doctrine, political thought, political ideas, political philosophy, and even political myth (Jenkin, 1955:10). Political theory may be referred to as a "consummation of explanation" (Brecht, 1959:14); or it may be concerned with political belief systems of general and comprehensive forms (Van Dyke, 1960:92); or it may consist of systematizations of facts (Easton, 1959:52-62); or else it penetrates to principles that are bound by history and rely on the methods of metaphysical symbolization (Voeglin, 1952:64).

Political theory is a relatively broad concept. Political theory is not exactly identical with political philosophy. As theorizing assumes a role of paramount importance in the directing of several inquiries, including those that pretend to be no more than the collecting of data, political theorists should be "part scientist and part philosopher" (Hacker, 1961:2). Therefore, I contend that political theory, in order to fulfill its multiple functions, possesses within itself the apparatus to deal with the normative. Normative questions refer to ethical problems that are concerned with inquiries into beliefs about ends, goals, values, and an examination of the conceptions of the good, the right, and the just. Since political theory also includes substantial amounts of description and explanation, it would be erroneous to limit its study solely to normative consideration. A political theorist is more a theory builder than a commentator. An even more tragic error, however, would be to effect an artificial separation between the political and the moral, thereby reducing the former practically to the level of mere statistical description.

Behavioral contempt for theory should be halted, therefore, at least for a moment, so that the value and significance of political theory can be examined. Human beings are not mechanical robots, and, consequently, scientific study by empirical methods suffers from inherent limitations when applied to human behavior. Subjective judgments cannot be entirely kept out (Charlesworth, 1962). We cannot dispense with such principles as justice, order, authority, freedom, and value judgment (Strauss, 1959: I, II, and III). Political theory has its own inherited jurisdiction that other disciplines cannot invade without doing violence to it. It is very dangerous for us to regard the empirical method as the only route to

knowledge. The artificial dichotomy between theorists and behaviorists, and between facts and values, is a spurious dichotomy. For polarization of political science might mean disintegration of political science. It is why I can share Cook's criticism of contemporary American political science when he wrote the following statement:

. . . political science in the United States has grown rapidly as an independent discipline, but that, largely through that very rapidity, it is more independent than disciplined, has revolted unduly against its progenitors, and has become as rootless as it is active (Cook, 19:75).

It is admitted here that without data, generalizations cannot be made with any degree of validity. A "theory" not based on facts cannot be so regarded in the true sense of the term. But an over-emphasis of facts, and an indulgence in what Easton terms "hyperfactualism," that is, studying political science as a subject in which fact is first and last and everything, would lead to a stultification of the discipline as a whole. Political science would then be reduced to the mere task of collecting data. Data forms only one part of the whole enterprise of political science. It should be recognized that data as "one part" must never be mistaken for the whole. While scholars like Key and Truman have no doubt made admirable contributions to political science, their works do not constitute a description of the entire gamut of political science. To treat them as the very representatives of the entire character of political science would be equivalent to treating technique as an end in itself, as a master rather than as a useful tool.

Over-simplification and over-specialization, while making use of facts, may detract seriously from viewing a body of facts in its holistic implications. Even Bentley (1949) did not seem to encourage the tendency of scholars to fall into a confusion between goal and process.⁵

His followers, however, often neglected his concern and have engaged in the study of the process to such an extent that the goal is repeatedly obfuscated. It might, then, be said that Bentley is not a Bentleyian in the sense supposed by some of his followers.

There is a difference between field studies, as they are understood in the social sciences, and laboratory findings, as they are understood in the physical sciences. As long as political scientists are academic researchers they must not abandon the academic spirit of inquiry and give up the scholarly approach as their ideal. Such a tendency would be suicidal. By giving up the scholarly ideal, they would stand midway between the scholar and the practitioner, without being either in a proper sense. They would, indeed, have fallen between the proverbial two stools.

What is practical to the behavioralists might appear effete to the practitioner. The reality hardened politician may well, from his viewpoint of a political practitioner, regard the behavioralists as starry-eyed idealists. In a

⁵ Bentley preferred the content of the process to the barren formalism, but he did not reject all "soul-stuffs," except only specific ones. He did not disregard the validity of real and true "ideas," "feelings," and "faculties" (Bentley, 1949:Ch. V).

nonpunitive vein, I wish to avow that political scientists as scholars cannot help being idealistic to some extent, because to be idealistic means to lead the study of politics forward and beyond the mere reach of the bare facts of the present. The political scientists must, therefore, adopt the scientific method with the necessary caution and circumspection, and must be fully aware of pitfalls accompanying a blind and total acceptance of a purely empirical approach that subjectively rejects *in toto* all other conceptualizations in the dynamic exploration of political science.

I would, indeed, find myself in agreement with Crick's argument that "the understanding of the American political tradition becomes more and more rational instead of reasonable. For it has been technology, and not science, that has been the real master-concept for most American political scientists" (Crick, 1959:237). Perhaps, the loss resulting from the technological approach is that such studies are in danger of losing their rarified qualities. It is more than absurd for a political scientist to demand that he should "comply with 'logical positivism' or else plead guilty to being a 'metaphysician'" (Strauss, 1962:314). I might go along with Kelsen's polemics that although "science must be separated from politics, politics need not be separated from science" (Kelsen, 1959:357). Yet, I would hesitate to accept Jacobson's thesis that "moralism is no more a synonym for political theory than is scientism" (Jacobson, 1958:121). For it is right for political theory to attach importance to the scientific factors, but it is wholly erroneous to conclude that the ethical residue of political theory is worthless.

What I claim here is that political theory must be esteemed properly and given its due place. Political theory is not mere "guesswork." Perhaps the prime significance of political theory lies in its capability of directing man's action. Conceding that it cannot always give direction to human action—a vantage point of attack by the idealists—it can, at least, clarify issues and indicate possible and even probable consequences of political activities. As Eckstein reported, ". . . analysis of the Greats at least sharpens the wits, deepens the imagination, and refines one's critical powers . . ." (Eckstein, 1956:482). A total rejection of political philosophy in the name of science might prove to be self-defeating. For, "If political philosophy is valuable as a source of data, it is also valuable as a source of ideas for analyzing the data. The history of political thought is indisputably a gold-mine of concepts, models, hypotheses, and methods which may turn out to be useful even in the analysis of contemporary political behavior" (Eckstein, 1956:485).⁶

Even those who reject political theory must know theory so that they can attack it from knowledge rather than ignorance. Otherwise, we have a technical equipment for going somewhere without proper knowledge of where to go. We are fully aware that tools and materials are useless without a proper blueprint in building a house. How-

⁶ For a more detailed study on the contribution of classical political theories, see Sibley (1958:125-48).

ever, in using the tools and materials of political science, do not the discipline's architects too often forget the blueprint of political science which is the crystallization of both classical, eclectic, and modern analytic theories? Hence, political scientists should be above and beyond any temptation of considering political theory as a target of disparagement simply for reasons of academic *amour propre*. Since the function of political theory is to determine the means, goals, and ultimate values that should govern the life of changing political society, "it is always new as well as always old, and . . . constantly changing even while it remains same" (Barker, 1928:42 ff).

Thus, in my opinion, empiricists would neither be "dead-end kids" nor "founding fathers" of political science. Political scientists must be neither "high-flying theorists" nor "down-to-earth practitioners." Lasswell, Catlin, and several others have changed radically from their early positions which they modified to take values and goals into account.⁷ Easton and Brecht are concerned with scientifically warranted assertions, but never neglect to admit the significance and importance of nonscientific thinking.

. . . there remains a gap which Scientific Method is indeed unable to close: the absolute validity of ultimate standards that underlie human value judgments cannot be established through this method (Brecht, 1959:484).

The chief intention of political theorists is not only to stress the importance of political philosophy, but also to implore both political philosophers and empirical political scientists to improve their methods and perceptions. It does not matter what the sciences are called—whether they be Windelband's nomothetic science or ideographic science, meta-politics or meta-theory. Political theorists must not divorce their thinking from the practical problems and realities of the world and the time in which they live.

Without doubt, current political science and traditional political science are not the same but they are by no means incompatible with each other (Kirkpatrick, 1962:19-29). We should not guide reality only from mere justification of principles, but, at the same time, we should not be captives of crude empiricism. The danger of the behavioral approach is that it may result in scientific infantilism unless it actively strives for sound theorizations. Thus, theorization is the prerequisite for wholesome perfection of political science as an academic discipline. Lasswell well pointed out the direction of future political science, "The future in this [political science] is partly open to direction through keener insight into the goals, assets, and liabilities of the self" (Lasswell, 1963:242). The problems presented before political scientists are no longer the choice between "formalism" and "vulgarism." Peaceful co-existence between theory and behaviorism alone is not sufficient. Mutual coordi-

⁷ Cf., Lasswell's later writings, especially the 1958 postscript to his *Politics, Who Gets What, When, How*. See Catlin (1957:21) and Merriam (1950-248).

nation and cooperation should be made in the direction of theory building as a core of political enterprise. Consequently, I cannot help watching with apprehension rather than with approbation the allegation of political scientists that political theory is the least significant field of the study of politics.

References

- American Political Science Association. 1951. *Goals for Political Science*. New York, William Sloane Association, Inc.
- APPLEBY, P. H. 1950. Political science, the next twenty-five years. *Amer. Pol. Sci. Rev.*, 46:924-932.
- BARKER, SIR E. 1928. *The Study of Political Science and its Relation to Cognate Studies*. Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press.
- BENTLEY, A. F. 1949. *The Process of Government*. Evanston, The Principia Press.
- BRECHT, A. 1959. *Political Theory*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- CATLIN, G. E. G. 1957. Political theory: what is it? *Pol. Sci. Q.*, 72:1-29.
- CHARLESWORTH, J. C. Editor. 1962. *The Limits of Behavioralism in Political Science*. Philadelphia, The Amer. Acad. of Pol. and Soc. Sci.
- COBBAN, A. 1953. The decline of political theory. *Pol. Sci. Q.*, 68:321-37.
- COOK, T. I. 1950. The methods of political science, chiefly in the United States. In Ebenstein, W., Editor. *Contemporary Political Science*. Paris, UNESCO.
- CRICK, B. 1959. *The American Science of Politics*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- EASTON, D. 1951. The decline of modern political theory. *J. of Politics*, 17:36-58.
- EASTON, D. 1959. *The Political System*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.
- ECKSTEIN, H. (rapporteur) 1956. Political theory and the study of politics: a report of a conference. *Amer. Pol. Sci. Rev.*, 50:475-487.
- FRIEDRICH, C. J. 1958. Political philosophy and the science of politics. In Young, R., Editor. *Approaches to the Study of Politics*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- GREAVES, H. R. G. 1960. Political theory today. *Pol. Sci. Q.*, 75:1-16.
- HACKER, A. 1961. *Political Theory: Philosophy, Ideology, Science*. New York, Macmillan Co.
- HYNEMAN, C. S. 1959. *The Study of Politics*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.
- JACOBSON, N. 1958. The unity of political theory: science, morals and politics. In Young, R. Editor. *Approaches to the Study of Politics*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- JENKIN, T. P. 1955. *The Study of Political Theory*. New York, Doubleday & Co.
- KELSEN, H. 1957. *What is Justice?* Berkeley, University of California Press.
- LASSWELL, H. D. 1958. *Politics, Who Gets What, When, How*. New York, Meridian Books.
- LASSWELL, H. D. 1963. *The Future of Political Science*. New York: Atherton Press.
- LASSWELL, H. D. and KAPLAN, A. 1950. *Power and Society*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- LASSWELL, H. D. and LERNER, D. 1951. *The Policy Sciences*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- KIRKPATRICK, E. M. 1962. The impact of the behavioral approach on traditional political science. In Ranney, A. Editor. *Essays on the Behavioral Study of Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- MERRIAM, C. E. 1950. Political science in the United States. In Ebenstein, W., Editor. *Contemporary Political Science*. Paris, UNESCO.
- LIPPINCOTT, B. E. 1950. Political theory in the United States. In Ebenstein, W., Editor. *Contemporary Political Science*. Paris, UNESCO.
- PLAMENATZ, J. P. 1960. The use of political theory. *Pol. Studies*, 8:37-47.
- SIBLEY, M. Q. 1958. The place of classical political theory in the study of politics: the legitimate spell of Plato. In Young, R. Editor. *Approaches to the Study of Politics*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- SMITH, D. G. 1957. Political science and political theory. *Amer. Pol. Sci. Rev.*, 51:734-746.
- SOMIT, A. and TANENHAUS, J. 1963. Trends in American political science. *Amer. Pol. Sci. Rev.*, 57:933-47.
- STRAUSS, L. 1962. Epilogue. In Storing, H. J. Editor. *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- STRAUSS, L. 1959. *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*. Glencoe, The Free Press.
- VAN DYKE, V. 1960. *Political Science: A philosophical Analysis*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- VOEGLIN, E. 1952. *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- WALDO, D. 1956. *Political Science in the United States of America*. Paris: UNESCO.