

Review - The Politics of Political Science

Written by Nelson Dionel Cardozo

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NELSON DIONEL CARDOZO, NOV 10 2019

The Politics of Political Science: Re-writing Latin American Experiences

By Paulo Ravecca

Routledge, 2019

Political science in Latin America has been quickly developing in recent decades and as a consequence the region started carrying out a self-reflection on the state of the discipline. From the special issue of the *Revista de Ciencia Política* that compiled different national case studies, with its re-version in 2015, we can see that the most important concern of the region was in measuring growth indicators. However, in 2014 studies in this area took a turn of the wheel after the signature of the *Popayán Manifesto* by Latin American political scientists who stated the need to develop categories of critical analysis to investigate issues such as the main theoretical frameworks which were being taught in the region, its professional networks and how they circulate, or the existing power relations within the disciplinary field.

With this in mind, *The Politics of Political Science* exposes the “forgotten” or “hidden” paradox of disciplinary inquiry within the field of political science. Paulo Ravecca tells us throughout these pages that “silences” and “oblivions” are not innocent and explores why political scientists (whose main task is to reflect on power relations) sometimes find it so hard to notice the very power relations that pervade their own discipline. This audacious provocation is the key that will guide him in his reflection on political science as a scientific discipline.

In this sense, the *Politics of Political Science* is a look at ourselves, at the narratives that we construct about our disciplinary history and our individual relationship to scientific knowledge. Perhaps the most interesting invitation we find throughout its pages is the one to reflect on how we construct ourselves as researchers in interaction with our objects of study and the academic community we are members of. The courageous proposal of the author is to think of himself as an individual who produces knowledge, having his own beliefs, values, trajectory, sexual identity and multiple intercrossings that define him and position him within an epistemic community.

The central goal of the book is to deconstruct the hegemonic visions on the development and institutionalization of political science in Latin America, a process named by Ravecca as the “consolidation of a mainstream” (p.6). In this way, the author first unveils the relationship that exists between knowledge and power, based on the prominent narratives on the formation of that mainstream, which he sees as positivist, liberal, sexist and based on white supremacy, and secondly, analyze two empirical cases in depth: Chile and Uruguay.

The book is structured in five chapters. The first chapter “Power, knowledge, and complex rationality” constitutes a theoretical and methodological proposal that operates as a manifesto for Ravecca’s work. This is followed by two chapters focused on empirical analysis: while in “When political science was authoritarian. Toward a protected democracy,” he discusses the production of Political Science in Chile during the 80’s, in “From Revolution to Transition: The making of a conformist academia in Uruguay and beyond”, he debates the scenario of the discipline in Uruguay. These two chapters show two opposite ways for the formation of the discipline: on the one hand, in an authoritarian, conservative and neoliberal context that seeks the establishment of a protected democracy, as in the case of Chile; and, on the other hand, the birth of a democratic political science that leaves the great utopias to embrace an academic liberalism, as in Uruguay. The other chapters (four and five) are committed to a capillary and

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ethnographic reflection about the authors' own personal biographical experience as a doctoral student in Canada. Finally, the work concludes with his theoretical proposal returning to the main question of the study of power relations and knowledge in the academic field.

In the first chapter, Ravecca proposes an epistemological reflection on the relationship between knowledge and power by conducting a literature review. There, he emphasizes the importance of authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche, his disciples, Michael Foucault, and Karl Marx (p.18). In line with the thought of these philosophers, power and knowledge are conceived in an immanently inseparable way. Thus he makes a journey through the proposals of the mentioned authors, and steers the ship towards the most diverse traditions such as Bourdieu's theory, the decolonial perspective and queer studies. He finishes the chapter with his epistemological proposal.

At this point the author offers us his strategy of auto-ethnographical self-reflection. This methodological proposal (in Ravecca's words) "explores human groups I belong to, in one way and another; some of the most revealing moments of the so-called fieldwork occurred in situations that transcend 'participatory observation', since they were episodes of my own life" (p.31). This research proposes an approach that combines artisan techniques such as reading academic articles, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews; with quantitative treatment of the data. The great innovation introduced at the methodological level is the idea of epistemological "temperatures", which want to refer to the distance and subjective commitment that the author finds himself while in relations with his object of study. Thus, the experiential appears as a dimension of the process of knowledge construction.

The chapter about political science in the Chilean dictatorship (with an epistemological temperature of "cold" due to the distance and the techniques used by the author) is the one that explores the development of what Ravecca calls "authoritarian political science" with greater depth and capillarity. The main axis that runs through this chapter is the relationship between political science and democracy (p.49), something that is almost an axiom for the history of the discipline. In this section we see a true vocation to "walking through mud", doing an exhaustive analysis of academic articles in two Chilean journals, *Revista de Ciencia Política* and *Revista Política*, observing the prominent positions on Marxism, democracy and neoliberal reforms, and the origin of the contributors. As a corollary of this chapter, it is pointed out that authoritarian political science effectively strengthened an academic debate on these issues, and also exercised authoritarian power in the name of democracy (p.86). At this point Ravecca discusses the idea of the banalization of the concept of disciplinary institutionalization, which leaves behind the exploration of the academic discourses on which they are built.

The following chapter discusses the development of political science in Uruguay (described as warm), based on the reading of articles published in the *Revista Uruguaya de Ciencia Política* and 22 interviews. From this, the reconstruction of the history of political science in this country is carried out, identifying the trauma that was the dictatorship, the fall of the Berlin Wall as the end of the socialist utopia (p.107), and the appropriation of the figure of Carlos Real de Anzúa as the founding father of the discipline in this country. The development of political science in Uruguay was mixed with the decline of Marxism, the idea of scientific objectivity, pluralist democracy, and partyocracy as axioms within the political community. In his analysis, Ravecca finds that the Uruguayan academic production in Political Science is characterized by an embrace of liberalism and the absence of critical theory (p.139). Thus, it is concluded that during the 90's and 2000's it acquired a disciplinary identity based on an illusory discourse of separation between academia and ideology (p.146), a naturalization of capitalism and a liberal democratic discourse.

Raising the epistemological temperature we arrive at the most autobiographical and personal (hot) chapter that explores the links between the production of knowledge, power relationships, and experiences lived from an "I" narrative (p.166). This section connects the importance of the researcher's trajectory, the rejection of his sexual orientation, the heteronormativity of the field, the mocking in childhood, the learning, the use of language, family relationships, among many other elements of individual biography.

The final chapter balances the different temperatures that present in the chapters of the book; going from the coldest and most distant, with the Chilean case, to the hotness of the autobiographical chapter. He then assembles a compendium for the sections presented. The author mentions that there is a vacuum, an absence of authoritarian

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political science in the Chilean academy. For Ravecca it is a model of research and society identified with liberalism. In Uruguay, he finds that the trauma of the dictatorship is understood as a negative moment for the community, but not as effectively as in Chile. In both cases, we find as the dominant topic a rejection of the dictatorship, but the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as a hegemonic power has also had intellectual repercussions on our Political Science (p.224). But in Chile, the liberal market project, the product of a repressive context that eliminated all resistance, has been more successful than in Uruguay, which underwent a less traumatic transition to a market economy, as the process of its implementation was held in a democratic scenario.

As final reflections, I want to emphasize that this work is an original and innovative look within the studies of the history of political science in Latin America, due to its disruptive character in several senses. On the one hand, at the methodological level, it tries to create a new toolbox to investigate disciplinary fields combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. At the same time it invites us to reflect on the position of the subject who knows and builds knowledge. To see the researcher far from the objectivist logic, to think about him (and to think about ourselves) as subjects immersed in a context, and within a scientific community is a challenge that confronts us and places us on a battlefield that we often ignore. The other challenge is to deconstruct the narratives that we produce and reproduce telling the history of political science. This book problematizes the ideas about the healthy link between democracy and political science that we assume without question. Thus, we see that a liberal-democratic context is not necessarily a prerequisite for the development of political science in a country.

The transgressive idea of an “authoritarian political science” burns this axiom. This book seeks to dynamite the main assumptions on which the discourse of construction of political science was based: on the one hand, it attempts to dynamite the conception of “democratic political science” as something that is not discussed; and on the other hand, it “desacralizes” the ivory tower of knowledge, by showing it intertwined with relations of power and ideology. As if that were not enough, the disruptive subjective exploration and autobiographical reflection of the author are the steel that builds the railway tracks on which this audacious train that transports us from the Chilean dictatorship to the Uruguayan democratic transition slides.

To think that it is possible to produce knowledge about politics, to shape a research agenda, to create academic communities in institutionalized spaces but in the context of a dictatorial regime is really a “disruption” of political “common sense” that tells us that without democracy the discipline of political science cannot grow. On the other hand, the idealized vision that Uruguayan political science has of itself is the other counterpoint for puncturing the “conformist” academy of that country and the formation of that mainstream. These two narratives were assumed by our discipline almost without discussion for decades. But the idea of a barren political science in the Chilean dictatorship, and the harmonious flourishing of Uruguayan democracy is challenged in this book. Ravecca’s incisive and critical gaze shows us that we must keep our sociological imagination alert and translate this toward us and the practices within which we produce and reproduce ourselves.

Innovation, audacity, self-reflection, and a sharp critical eye on one’s own field irremediably link us to the curtain that Pierre Bourdieu removed from the french academy in his famous work *Homo Academicus*. Thus, as Bourdieu from his own position as a postman’s son from the Pyrenees could see the power relations in the parisian university; here we find a young gay scholar who investigates subjects that are not in the mainstream in the Uruguayan academy, and is encouraged to tell us what no one dares to say: the King is naked!

About the author:

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