

ProSEPS deliberative event

The Hague, 19 September 2019

Group 3 – Political science, democracy and civic engagement

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Guidelines: Luca Verzichelli

Discussants: Leonardo Morlino (LUISS, Rome), Christophe Roux (University of Montpellier)

Rapporteurs: Christophe Roux and Luca Verzichelli

Group 3 had a very lively and fruitful discussion in this session. A central issue is identified by Leonardo Morlino: political science as a discipline is marked by a tension between its function of empirically-based production of knowledge and the fact that it cannot avoid dealing with normative, politically relevant issues (especially in the context of democracy). Of course, PS is mainly, extensively empirical and distinct from political activity. But, historical accounts show us, it was created thanks to its relevance with regards to key political issues as the history, starting from American during the 20th century and especially in the immediate post-war period (1940s). Nowadays political science is often, and perhaps much more now than one or two decades ago, asked to justify its relevance in terms of impact for society in general.

The question of impact, it has been underlined, is not easy to grasp, because it can be conceived as having a direct influence (e.g. given policy measure) or producing an indirect impact (e.g. civic education or cognitive impact in the framing of the public debate). This question, very interestingly, also raises the question of the capacities of political scientists to have influence and to make their knowledge 'useful' – provided that they find the right channels of communication. But sometimes it also raises questions about their willingness to have some for those who conceived academic work as a mainly distinct activity.

It has been stressed, as well, that impact can be analyzed at different levels: the macro-contextual level (political regime, economic situation, academic institutional settings) and the micro level (the way individual political scientists behave). It has been pointed out, also, that differences may be identified between countries, subfields and generations (be it put in terms of age or of career stages).

In dealing with that tension participants identified a set of opportunities and constraints that refer to (a) the political context, (b) financial resources and (3) time.

There are, of course, opportunities for political scientists. The democratic political context provides freedom to perform research and teaching and to disseminate knowledge; to a certain extent, the funding programs have developed on a national and European basis and have extend possibilities to run ambitious research programs and to better connect with each other and with society alike; and the academic profession is supposed to provide us with an autonomous management of the working time, in all of its aspects.

But, on the other hand, there are constraints with which political scientists are not equally able to cope and that participants discussed more extensively.

The political context may be an obvious source of constraints in those cases of authoritarian, illiberally democratic, hybrid regimes or in those cases of sound democratic regimes facing the rise of populist radical parties. Of course, these situations or shifts provide their share of opportunities, it is noticed, to provide analytical insights that may sound attractive for the general public and academia alike

In terms of resources, the potential availability of funding does not mean that there is an equal share for all, with many important consequences, including sometimes a risk to lose motivation and meaning for the profession. It may also display deeper consequences in intellectual terms where international funding transform some scholars, especially in more peripheral parts of the continent, in mere data providers as far as their activity is concerned and, at best, simply users of theories and concepts that have been produced abroad – hence with a direct impact on the content of what political scientists do as scholars and on what they can offer to society in general.

In terms of time, political scientists, as other academics, have to deal with a growing number of tasks and activities: importance of teaching loads, service activities, bureaucratic evaluation, search for funding, extra-academic dissemination of knowledge. To what extent, it is asked, is it sustainable?

Participants then discussed the way these opportunities/constraints divide can be bridged. Can, say, political science associations effectively help to limit isolation and inequalities? Can civic engagement provide us with more tools to ensure the free democratic environment we and the general public need? May communication tools such as social

networks help us to better manage our time? These are equally plausible or questionable suggestions that were discussed in an effort to suggest possible priorities regarding future scenarios for the discipline.

The final session stress the possibility for political science to be a science in and for democracy, taking stock of previous successes and achievements of the discipline. The diversity of national situations can be a benefit provided that they are fully understood to create future convergence. This requires, it is agreed, to improve financial capacities that are not well balanced in Europe (between and within countries), to consider a greater use of technological tools to better spread knowledge and to build alliances with different actors within the academia (with other disciplines) and outside (civil society and decision-makers).