

Philosophy of political science.

Prolegomena of a neglected subdiscipline

1 Abstract and introduction. Limits and possibilities of political science research: axiological, epistemic, methodological and ontological foundations

Political philosophy has remained one of the most established subdisciplines in political science for over two millennia. In contrast, the situation of the subdiscipline of *philosophy of political science* is the complete opposite. The philosophical foundations of political science, the subject of the philosophy of political science, were already studied in antiquity, especially in the Aristotelian *Organon*; but today the philosophy of political science is probably the most neglected subdiscipline of political science.

First, the current state of research is briefly explained in this paper. Second, the axiological, epistemic, methodological and ontological foundations of political science are presented. Axiology, epistemology, methodology, and ontology provide, in my opinion, the four most important foundations of the subdiscipline. Thirdly, the significance of this subdiscipline for the subject of political science is outlined: the limits and possibilities of political science research can ideally be discussed on the basis of these four philosophical foundations. The bibliography provides hints for further research.

Furthermore, a prolegomenon is also expected to discuss at least the most important theses. This cannot be done in a letter but will instead be done in book form. So far, I have only published on the methodological dimension of the philosophy of political science (Lauer 2017, 2021a and 2021b).

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2 State of research: philosophy of political science

2.1 Philosophy of science

The 19th century witnessed the emancipation of individual sciences from philosophy. But this process ended in the first half of the 20th century. At the same time, a new, special discipline was established within philosophy: philosophy of science (Lohse/Reydon 2017, Okasha 2016 [2002], Rosenberg/McIntyre 2020 [2000]).

The general *philosophy of science* analyzes the rational limits and possibilities of the sciences or of the science system. The fundamentals of science and scientific research are at the center of all its investigations. It discusses the importance of empiricism, methodology, practical relevance, rationality and values. Its central questions relate to the foundations as well as the limits and possibilities of scientific research. In short, it is about guaranteeing scientificity. In my opinion, four areas and thus complexes of questions can be ideally identified:

1. *Ontology*: What objects can and should be scientifically investigated? What kinds of problems, what entities, characteristics, phenomena, relations or structures should be addressed within science?
2. *Axiology*: What tasks and goals do scientists pursue? To what extent can and should values be studied? According to what values should scientific research proceed?
3. *Methodology*: Which methodologies and methods can guarantee scientificity?
4. *Epistemology*: What is and what can science do? What results, knowledge or theories can science generate?

At first, these questions were explained using the example of physics. Then more and more disciplines joined in including the social sciences (Cartwright 2014, Kincaid 2012, Lohse/Reydon 2017, McIntyre/Rosenberg 2017). The 20th century differentiation of



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philosophy of science has finally reached political science, one of the last disciplines to be reached by it.

2.2 Philosophy of political science

The special discipline “philosophy of political science” is still in its infancy. *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Social Science* (McIntyre/Rosenberg 2017) has a chapter on every social science (economics, history, political science, psychology and sociology/anthropology). The chapter on political science is titled “*Why is there no philosophy of political science?*” (Verbeek/McIntyre 2017).

Firstly, the authors state that there is no special discipline of “philosophy of political science” with a corresponding institutional anchoring in the science system, e.g. curricula, chairs or journals. Secondly, there are a variety of contributions that deal with the limits and possibilities of political science research as well as its scientific foundations and thus with fundamental questions of the subject.

Indeed, the philosophical foundations of political science were already studied in antiquity, especially in the Aristotelian *Organon*. Since the emergence of modern political science at the beginning of the twentieth century, the arguments about the foundations of the discipline have split along ideological fronts. Unfortunately, even today one can legitimately speak of a “*science war*” or a “*Methodenstreit*” (Lauer 2017).

On one side of this war are the naturalists, (neo-) positivists and scientific scientists, who base their view on the goals and methodologies of the natural sciences (Box-Steffensmeier/Brady/Collier 2010 [2008], Moses/Knutsen 2012 [2007]). On the other stand the hermeneutics, constructivists and interpretivists, who orient themselves on the goals and methodologies of the humanities (Bevir/Rhodes 2016, Creswell 2013 [1998], Flick/Kardorff/Steinke 2015 [2000], Yanow/Schwartz-Shea 2014 [2006]). As I



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have shown elsewhere (Lauer 2017), this ideological confrontation can be traced back to the axiological, epistemic, methodological and ontological foundations of the discipline. There are assumptions or prerequisites about the limits and possibilities of political science research that justify the formation of schools within the discipline of political science.

In addition to the contribution by Verbeek and McIntyre (2017), there are only two other articles on the philosophy of political science, one by Herfeld (2017) and one by Pozzoni (2020). Herfeld presents three topics that should be dealt with within the philosophy of political science: the methodological area, the traditional area of the philosophy of science and the area of normative questions (Herfeld 2017). Pozzoni advocates a “philosophy of the social sciences in a unitary fashion”, starting from the assumption that “the only legitimate definition of ‘philosophy of political science’ is ‘the philosophical study of whatever happens to conventionally fall within the scope of political science at a given moment’” (Pozzoni 2020).

3 Axiological, epistemic, methodological and ontological foundations of political science

Due to the necessary specialization of political science, the empirical orientation as well as the concentration on empirical and practical theories, i.e. especially on the empirical (descriptive, explanatory and prognostic) and practical (normative, pragmatic and technical) content, important philosophical prerequisites get lost. However, these requirements have a decisive effect on the content. The focus of the philosophy of political science should therefore lie on the following areas: axiology, epistemology, methodology and ontology. Its central questions relate to the foundations as well as the limits and possibilities of political science research. In short, it is about guaranteeing



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scientificity in political science. For systematic reasons, the following sets of questions should be addressed:

1. *Ontological dimension*: What is the subject area of political science as part of the science system? What kinds of problems, what entities, properties, phenomena, relations or structures are addressed within political science?
2. *Axiological dimension*: What tasks and goals can and should political scientists pursue? To what extent can and should political values be studied? According to which values should political science research proceed?
3. *Methodological dimension*: Which political science methodologies and methods can guarantee scientificity? What political science methodologies can be used? What are the limits and possibilities of political science methodologies?
4. *Epistemic dimension*: What results, knowledge goals, political knowledge or political theories can be generated by political science?

4 Limits and possibilities of political science research

The scientification of politics as well as of life in general is extremely advanced. As collateral damage, secularization has raised science to a religion, able to provide us with definitive answers in all areas of life. It is therefore particularly important to find out why scientific findings are not definitive, but only hypothetical, answers. The if-then structure of all scientific knowledge and thus both the limits and the possibilities of science can be investigated in particular in the subdiscipline “philosophy of political science”; that is, the limits and possibilities of political science research ideally based on axiological, epistemic, methodological and ontological foundations can be discussed ideally. The point is to explain the controversies associated with the



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philosophical foundations or, as Mark Bevir aptly formulates it, to show the metamethodological foundations, the “undergrowth” of every science. The title of his article, fittingly, is “Meta-methodology: Clearing the Underbrush” (Bevir 2010 [2008]).

An examination of political science’s philosophical presuppositions is urgently needed, because otherwise it strays from a core area of the sciences and thus loses out to other sciences: “But my main point is simply that political methodologists are dangerously out of touch. Philosophical thinking has altered dramatically in ways that render highly problematic the meta-methodological assumptions of many political scientists. Discussion of methods and their utility are profoundly impoverished by a lack of thought about their epistemological, ontological, and explanatory assumptions” (Bevir 2010 [2008]:48-49).

The formation of schools, even within the subject of political science, proceeds on the basis of axiological, epistemic, and ontological methodological preferences, as is shown not least by the so-called *Methodenstreit* (Lauer 2017). A systematic reconstruction and self-reflection of scientific foundations is therefore necessary in every subject science, not least because this is the only way to prevent the misuse of science.

This special field enables a therapeutic dimension for the elimination of misunderstandings; in addition, innovative insights can be elaborated that can advance the discipline in many ways. For these and many other reasons, I argue for an institutionalization of the subdiscipline “philosophy of political science”, with a corresponding institutional anchoring in the system of science, e.g. curricula, chairs and journals.



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“Methodenstreit” and Political Science. Methodological Science War at the Beginning of the 21st Century between the scientific Establishment and phronetic Perestroikans. The monograph is currently only available in German, exceptions: Abstract, introduction and charts are in English:

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