

# Political Science is Going Ahead (By Convoluted Ways)

## A Commentary on Giovanni Sartori

In his reflections on “Where is Political Science Going?,” professor Sartori brightly points out some present flaws in the discipline: too much empiricism and too little applied research. At attacking “American-type” political science, however, I think he chooses a mistaken enemy. I will hold, in contrast, that the main source of the mentioned flaws is the weakness of political theory.

I am very happy to know that Sartori has “always maintained that our ‘model’ is economics.” I do too, and I do not think there is much more to choose from in the social sciences. But indeed economics is not a model to establish political science’s “own identity” as a “soft science,” as Sartori holds. Economics is a rather hard science and should be taken as such, if it were the case, as a model. Sartori is right that political science has developed relatively little applied research. This is reflected in the supply of teaching, with relatively few programs in public policy and administration in comparison to programs in political science, in contrast, for instance, with

the very high number of business schools in comparison to programs in economics. But the very example of economics shows that in the social sciences, as in all sciences, while

there can be theoretical research and applied research, the latter without the former is neither science nor a contribution to cumulative knowledge or intellectual, material, or moral progress of human beings. Atheoretical applied teaching can transmit, at most, certain tools and skills based on practitioners’ experience (in business or in electoral campaigns or in whatever else). But the big expansion of applied economics and business studies in the last two or three decades has been successful thanks to the high level of consistency which has been achieved in economic theory after a long trajectory of cumulative knowledge. Political science as an academic discipline emerged—as remarked by Sartori—much later than economics and, logically, it is still at a relatively backward stage in which theoretical research on basic questions yet to be solved tends to dominate. I wish that theoretical research in political science may eventually produce results at least as consistent as those in economics and as able to guide the expansion of applied research at a comparable scale.

by

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All political scientists should be very grateful to the founders of political science; some of them (but only some) are mentioned by Sartori. Without them we would not be here, that is, doing research and teaching, or writing or reading this essay. But, as all founders, those of political science established only certain foundations of the discipline whose own development should lead us beyond. As Sartori says, the founders’ main task was the provision of a number of highly relevant “definitions” to develop further analysis, to which I would add a number of “classifications” (like those of Sartori himself, for instance, on party systems) which opened the way to start collecting and making sense of information. However, scientific progress requires something else. To be put in a simple framework, at least four levels of knowledge of whatever object can be distinguished:

- 1) Definitions and classifications;
- 2) Quantitative measurements;
- 3) Causal hypotheses;
- 4) Explanatory theory.

The founding fathers, as acknowledged by Sartori, stayed basically at the first level: definitions. What surprises Sartori is that in further developments the discipline has reached the second level, centered on quantitative measurements. The “ancient sage,” as he himself is characterized, is absolutely right at noting that too often “measurement replaces definitions,” which makes the former useless and sometimes counterproductive. It is impossible not to share his dismay at so many statistical exercises pretending only to modify some of the variables in a regression model previously presented by other authors, or to give another message to the same data, without even defining clearly what we are talking about nor considering hypotheses or theories that could make sense of the exercise or clarify the relevance of the question. Hundreds of graduate students and assistant professors have been and are currently victims of “research programs” made only of statistical exercises without direction. But perhaps this is a somewhat inevitable cost derived from the expansion of available information, since econometricists have often felt in the same kind of exercise—and, although I know other fields much less, I suspect that this may have also affected other still more “model” sciences like physics or experimental biology.

Certainly the really existing political science—that is, what political scientists do—is still far away from being a science in the full sense of the word, including the four components mentioned above. To achieve the highest level—a satisfactory political theory—we should start, first, from a precise delimitation of the object, in which politics should not be considered to be a mere derivation from the economy, social structures, or culture, but a rational activity to be explained by itself. Second, we need a clear definition of human motives in political action from which models and explanations of empirical observations can be derived. Finally, we should adopt a consistent criterion of judgment to evaluate the outcomes of political action.

On all this, there have been and there will be multiple opinions, alternatives, and schools of thought. But a clear symptom of theoretical weakness is that, in contrast to what happens in economics and other social sciences, in political studies the so-called classical authors are still placed at the same level as—or even above—the most advanced contemporary researchers. To be said in a few words, almost no paper by Machiavelli or Montesquieu or the other usual members of the sacred list would be accepted today to be published in academic journals with anonymous referees. Any person used to reading contemporary academic literature should recognize that, when consulting the classics, what we find very often are confusing and ambiguous statements and arguments—and for this reason several generations of scholars still waste their lives trying to ascertain “what exactly these masters (sometime ago Marx, today perhaps Nietzsche or Tocqueville) were trying to say.”

I am not going to deny the founding role of some classics and the interest in reading them today to identify certain fundamental questions, as well as conjectures and hypotheses to be tested, or even possible suggestions to develop research with current methods. It can also be appropriate to include in a program of political studies a genealogy of how concepts, definitions, and hypotheses have been shaped through centuries. But for this to be formative for students the instructor should show which were the seminal contributions and how, in contrast, some of the concepts forged by “the classics” are imprecise, tautological, or hardly fruitful; and how many of their hypotheses have turned out to be wrong and have been refuted by experience and subsequent academic studies. The habitude of identifying “political theory” with the history of ideas is offensive to current political science because, in spite of all the limitations sketched above, the discipline has forged some

solid theoretical foundations beyond our ancestors’ initial contributions. These include, among other important themes and subjects: collective action, political parties, electoral systems, electoral strategies, agenda formation of policy issues, institutional choices, and the meaning of democracy. In this perspective, it would be much more interesting to include in the list of classics, for instance, Dahl, Downs, Duverger, Olson, and Riker—none of whom, by the way, are mentioned by Sartori among the “founders”—than discussing once more one of Plato’s footnotes. Of course, the still common identification in political studies of “theory” with “classics” is strange to all other social sciences, in none of which such veneration is still maintained.

I think Sartori fails dramatically in choosing a target when he identifies “American-type” political science as the enemy to beat. First, it should be remembered that, according to fine calculations, about 80% of political science instructors and researchers in the world work in universities and institutions seated in the United States (although a significant number of them came from other longitudes). To be isolated from them would only produce some parochial curiosity. I thus join enthusiastically Sartori’s invitation to “visit, to believe, the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association.” My personal experience as participant in about a dozen of these meetings over more than 15 years is exactly the opposite of Sartori’s, since while he says to have experienced “unfading dullness,” I have found there the best intellectual stimuli and passion to share ambitious projects. Visit, then, and decide for yourselves.

Finally, “the alternative” for which Sartori sides attests only to his well-known sense of humor, because it is nothing else than “to resist the quantification of the discipline.” If he had at least desired that quantification were based on clear and precise definitions and classifications, then I could not agree more. Then we would be moving from level 1 to level 2 in my previous sketch. I side on the alternative of moving from level 1 to level 2, which indeed requires relying on the former, but also to levels 3 and 4. That is, to follow seriously the “model” of economics and, in general, of all science, in the aim of achieving explanatory theory also able to support applied research. This way we could progress not only in the knowledge of politics, but also in the likely outcomes of political action, to the benefit of the greater satisfaction (or happiness or utility, all of which, as famously stated by one classic, is the same) of the greater number of citizens.