

## ON THE PURITY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH. A POLEMICAL APPROACH

Włodzimierz Mich

Division of Journalism, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University  
pl. Litewski 3, 20-080 Lublin, Poland  
e-mail: wozimierz.mich@neostrada.pl

**Summary.** The article is a contribution to the ongoing discussion at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University's Faculty of Political Science on the desirable scope of teaching and research publications. The author declares against the tendency to achieve 'purity' of political science research. He argues that both on the level of the teaching staff, and the level of structures, and finally on the level of methodology, political science institutions in Poland function in diverse ways, using also the achievements of other disciplines. What is more, 'pure political science' cannot exist because extensive investigations of political science phenomena require interdisciplinary studies, whose conduct entails competencies characteristic of many sciences such as linguistics, law, philosophy, history, sociology or psychology. Therefore, the scope of research or the research methods applied should not be restricted. What should be done, however, is to ensure the high substantive and factual level of publications.

**Key words:** scholarly disciplines, political science, research

The starting point of the present discussion is the observation that at the UMCS (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University) Faculty of Political Science there are still (and even growing) controversies over the desirable scope of teaching and research activity. This matter has cropped up for some time, whether in connection with the approval of subjects of MA theses or with the qualifying of doctoral and postdoctoral dissertations for defense. Some faculty members are clearly trying to narrow down this scope radically, both regarding the choice of subjects and the ways of presenting them for the sake of 'political science purity' of our research. This is very dangerous because it may lead to a serious conflict, and consequently, to the disintegration of the Faculty and a significant drop in the growth rate of scholarly productions.

This calls for a serious debate. I speak out to opt for a very wide admissible scope of research with a simultaneous strict insistence on its high level. I, therefore, declare against any attempt to achieve the 'purity' of political science research.

One of the reasons is that 'pure political science' does not exist. Political science is a new scientific discipline largely derived from legal sciences. It also

borrowed both its scholars and the scope and methods of research from history, and to some extent from other social sciences. As a result, institutes of political science employ the academic staff who came from various scholarly disciplines and still represent their characteristic mentality. The obvious and often raised issue is distinguishing between or even contrasting political scientists and historians. This does not exhaust the problem, however. The division into 'pure' political science and legal scholars may be regarded as equally important. The majority of the academic staff might not meet the criteria of 'purity' because they came from other disciplines.

'Pure' political science does not exist also in the sense that there is no single, commonly accepted and realized model of political science research. Diversity is visible already at the level of organizational structures. Political science at most universities is organized into Institutes as part of Faculties with a broader scope, e.g. at Wrocław University or at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań these are Faculties of Social Sciences with inter alia Institutes of Philosophy and Institutes of Sociology. Postdoctoral dissertations are defended there in front of the Faculty Councils made up of representatives of various sciences, which, without doubt, influences the subject matter and ways of realization of the dissertations presented.

This is connected with the internal structure of Institutes of Political Science, which are diversified in different academic centers. Departments/divisions and chairs of political science were not established according to a single plan adopted in advance but depending on the number of academic staff available. As a result, individual centers give prominence to different research trends already at the structural level. These differences also result from diverse ways of understanding political science by individual scholars, which in turn is largely connected with their education. This applies both to the range of problems and the chronological scope of research. The Jagiellonian University Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations comprises inter alia the Chair of Contemporary Political Systems, Chair of Constitutionalism and Government Systems, and the Department of Jurisprudence and Science of the State. This can be regarded as a strong emphasis on the legal subject matter. Another distinctive feature, visible not so much at the structural level as at the level of subjects of publications, is the extension of research into very remote times, which is also characteristic of legal sciences. An illustrative example is the study by B. Szlachta *Konstytucjonalizm czy absolutyzm? Szkice z francuskiej myśli politycznej XVI wieku* (Constitutionalism or absolutism? Essays in the sixteenth-century French political thought), Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków 2004.

A characteristic feature of the Poznań political science center or even more so in the Warsaw center, is precedence given to media science research. The Adam Mickiewicz University Institute of Political Science and Journalism includes inter alia Department of Journalism and Department of Press Systems and Press Law, as well as the Press Analyses Division and Division of Journalistic Prac-

tice. In other political centers, apart from Warsaw, this research segment is not so structurally expanded. On the other hand, however, the Wrocław University Institute of Political Science comprises inter alia Department of Social Communication and Journalism, which is a far wider formula than that adopted in Poznań.

In each of these academic centers political science research and studies are profiled somewhat differently, depending above all on the academic staff available. 'Pure political science' in Lublin would thus turn out to be something different than for example in Cracow. Some of these differences will most probably be eliminated as more scholars with political science education receive senior degrees and scientific titles. To some extent, however, diversity is unavoidable (even if we assume that there will be changes taking place in individual centers rather than reproduction of the existing state of affairs).

This is going to happen because, which is another and far more serious argument, 'pure political science' cannot exist. Extensive research into political phenomena requires interdisciplinary studies, for which competencies are needed, characteristic of many sciences such as linguistics, law, philosophy, history, sociology or psychology. These competencies can be learned neither at political science studies nor in the process of research narrowed down to 'pure political science research', however defined. One cannot study for example political behaviors without a broad knowledge of social behaviors in general. Likewise, in order to study the language of politics in a sensible way, one should have a general knowledge about language, in short, one should be a specialist in linguistics. A strong political science academic center should, therefore, assemble representatives of many disciplines, i.e. people who not only have graduated in different disciplines but still practice them, conducting appropriate research and educating their successors. This is, after all, in accordance with the formal powers of the Faculty Council to confer degrees and recommend the granting of scientific titles, which cover 'political sciences/sciences of politics' rather than 'one science of politics'. From this point of view, the only criterion for the selection of research themes should be the object criterion: political science texts should relate to politics. It is not obvious because there are justified doubts about the possibility of acquiring appropriate competencies with the research field so narrowed down. Those that deal with strictly political problems only from their MA thesis to professorship may be too narrowly educated specialists. The adoption of such a narrowing-down criterion may, however, be unavoidable, otherwise the Faculty or Institute of Political Science would be a miniature of all social faculties at a university.

The adoption of the proposed, fairly obvious criterion does not eliminate disputes about specific solutions. In the course of approving subjects of dissertations there may be disputes about whether a particular problem can be regarded as political, or only associated with politics, and in that case is it enough if it is associated indirectly or must it be directly connected with it? For example, are

the relations between the Poles and the Jews discussed in one postdoctoral dissertation on the level of social attitudes already within the scope of political science or is this discipline only interested in the relations between organizations produced by these social groups? Or perhaps the object of political science research are the organizations only just striving to win and exercise authority or influence it. This depends on the way of conceiving of politics, for example giving prominence to it as a central category of authority or interests of social groups.

A supplementing element to the problem criterion used in political science centers is generally the chronological criterion: it is assumed that political science research covers the present day or very recent past. This does not seem to be a reasonable solution. I suggest abandoning the chronological criterion as the basis of defining the field of research. If we accept the first postulate, we should thereby conclude that a political science study can be concerned with politics at any of its stages, starting from as far back as the Bronze Age. After all, I do not see why a study on the political propaganda practiced by Alexander the Great should be less 'political-science' than a study on the political propaganda practiced, for example, by Edward Gierek (communist ruler of Poland in 1970–1980). Therefore, rather than narrow down our research and give ground to historians, we should do the opposite: expand into this research territory. After all, historical research is carried out as part of various branches of science (history of medicine, history of economy, etc.). There is no reason why political science in particular should give up this kind of research. What is more, without conducting it, political science will strongly limit the possibility of analyzing current events, let alone forecasting future developments. For this purpose, it is necessary to observe long-term tendencies. The assumption that political science deals only with the present day condemns it to historical short-sightedness and thereby to the inability to make correct conclusions. The solution largely regarded as the right one today, i.e. the division of tasks between historians, who collect facts and data, and political scientists, who analyze them scientifically, is no guarantee of success. The differences about how historians and political scientists perceive political phenomena are generally so fundamental that the findings obtained by the former may be unclear or misleading to the latter, even because of the use of different concepts. It is also difficult to expect that those who do not know certain patterns of analysis of political science phenomena will be able, for example during archival search, to make a correct selection of information useful for the application of these patterns – just as it is difficult to imagine that the findings ascertained by a historian who never studied medicine could be especially useful to a medical practitioner who would like to get to know the dynamics of development in his branch of knowledge. Therefore, research into the political events of the past for the purposes of political science should be conducted by political scientists, but with a solid historical background both with regard to the knowledge of the period investigated and the ability to conduct research. One should also remember that many attractive research problems

concerning the present time simply cannot be thoroughly studied yet as the necessary sources are not available. It may be more beneficial to deal with the past. At any rate, more careful selection is necessary, for example regarding the subjects of doctoral dissertations.

However, the adoption of the problem scope as the only criterion for 'political-scienceness' produces certain problems, especially with its extensive interpretation. This type of research can be, and to some extent is, conducted at all social faculties at a university. Under these circumstances one can challenge the idea of maintaining separate units conducting political science research. To go further, it would be enough to establish interfaculty departments of political science realizing the teaching tasks in this sphere. This argument can certainly be undermined to some extent. Investigation of political phenomena by the academic staff of social faculties is somewhat hampered because other research trends prevail there, e.g. philologists used to dealing with great literature are not enthusiastic about studies concerning utilitarian texts, e.g. propagandistic ones. Nevertheless, the object criterion can be regarded as insufficient.

We can recognize, to a degree, the reasons advanced by the followers of 'pure' political science research, who contend that the specificity of the research field is not sufficient to define political science – in the sense that while a political science study must be concerned with politics, the fact alone that a study relates to politics does not mean that it is a political science study. Its status would thus be determined by the treatment of the subject matter or research methods applied. It is a fact that e.g. the studies compiled by legal scientists related to state institutions have a one-sided juridical character. They discuss legal norms without, however, taking into sufficient consideration the functioning of institutions, the way of implementation of legal norms resulting at least from the composition of political forces or the personalities of people in power. This produces the temptation to develop the manner of investigating political phenomena characteristic of political science. This temptation, justified to some extent, possible or even necessary to carry out, is extremely dangerous as a general directive since it threatens to impoverish research on a huge scale. Moreover, it is essentially impossible to carry out within the existing departmental structures and therefore within research trends. It is difficult, for example, to imagine a political-science manner of pursuing political sociology or political philosophy. This is also the case with political communication. Also in other cases the attempt to impose uniform solutions would lead to excessively narrowing down the research profile: narrowing down rather arbitrarily as it would be done by people with their subjective ideas of the discipline, its scope and methodology.

This certainly does not mean that we should not try to gradually give the research conducted at the Faculty of Political Science a certain distinctly specific character. It should not consist, however, in narrowing down but rather in expanding the scope of research. Unlike e.g. legal scholars or historians who work

at their mother Faculties, their counterparts at the Faculty of Political Science should write interdisciplinary studies, in which they would make use of the achievements of other sciences of politics as well. At the same time, while striving for the 'political-scienceness' of the studies written at the Faculty of Political Science, it is necessary to take care of their scholarly level. For the former quality does not guarantee the latter. One could even say that it is often quite the opposite: political science texts tend to be impressive but superficial. They somewhat resemble Easter eggshells: the pretty form does not have the equally attractive content. I also have the impression that this tendency is growing. Although I do not want it, a stereotype is forming in my mind that a political science study is one that has a didactic rather than research character. It is a study produced by someone trained on textbooks and coursebooks, and consequently not quite cognizant of what scholarly research consists in. Someone who believes that they have carried out research while they have in fact only studied the literature on the subject, having only made preliminary steps before starting research proper. Someone who does not understand that a scholarly study, especially a graded one, should contribute something new to the previous findings. For me, a historian by profession, innovation largely consists in investigating something that no one has investigated before or in making use of new sources, thus broadening the knowledge of facts. I understand, however, that it may consist in a new interpretation enabling us to understand a phenomenon better due to a highly ingenious analysis of the well-known source material. I would find it difficult, however, to believe that it is possible to present a sensible interpretation or treatment without studying the sources on one's own even if they have already been repeatedly examined: the analyses have been made in different ways. We should, therefore, make our younger colleagues understand the need to study the sources thoroughly and in-depth. We should combine the research reliability typical of (good) historians with the boldness and originality of analysis that characterize (good) political scientists.

The requirement of interdisciplinarity and originality of research may not be enough, however. It is necessary to define more precisely the specificity of the political science treatment/interpretation of the problems under discussion. I do not feel competent enough to carry out this task. I would like, though, to speak out in the discussion going on at the UMCS Faculty of Political Science on the matter of differences between historical and political science writings. A recurring view is that the former are characterized by a chronological presentation in a study, while the latter are distinguished by the problem arrangement. This is a simplistic view but still admissible. I do not share the opinion that a historical study can be a chronicle of events, a pure description of the past reality. A (good) historian analyzes events and tries to understand their causes: the most important in historical research is after all the question 'why'? Nevertheless, I acknowledge that relations between description and analysis in political science papers and studies must be different than in historical ones. Then perhaps we should not use the

chronological arrangement of the content in political science studies, which is somehow automatically regarded as characteristic of scholarly historical productions. (suffice it to say that legal scholars speak of using the historical method when they indeed use the chronological arrangement of the content). However, I find such a standpoint somewhat simplistic. The arrangement of a study depends, to a decisive measure, on the specific nature of the phenomenon investigated. Sometimes the use of the chronological arrangement allows us to present a particular subject better. For example, the biography of a politician has to have a chronological (or chronological-problem) structure. And I hope we are not giving up biography writing to historians. On the other hand, it is not so that the studies by historians are always written in a chronological arrangement. There are also studies compiled by historians that have the problem arrangement.

We can assume, nevertheless, that in principle the problem arrangement should be used simply because it provides more opportunities for analysis while the chronological arrangement is rather oriented towards presenting successive events. The problem is essentially about giving prominence to either of the approaches because both of them can and probably have to be combined. The issue is therefore the criterion serving to distinguish chapters in a study. Even if sub-chapters are also arranged by problems, then within these, in most studies, there will certainly be elements of the chronological arrangement, otherwise it will not be possible to show the dynamics of the phenomena discussed.

The adoption of the principle of the problem arrangement will not be enough, however. A political science paper or study presumably has to be based on a clearly defined research pattern such as the theory of fields, also comprising a characteristic categorial framework. This should be its specific character and largely is, at least in contrast to history, which does not have research tools of this kind. At this point, though, the question returns about the relations between political science and, for example, sociology or political philosophy (and other disciplines dealing with political phenomena and having their own research methods and categorial frameworks). As I said above, I support the admissibility of different research approaches. The condition for this should be the application of a specific scientific theory (or several specific ones) to empirical research, and a very clear definition of the research methods and assumptions applied. Currently, in many studies, especially MA theses, but also in doctoral dissertations, research methods are defined in a very imprecise, sometimes even humorous way, for example the aforementioned 'historical method' applied to the chronological arrangement of content or the statements by some authors that they use the 'method of source analysis' while this only indicates one area of research, which can be carried out using many methods (for example by seeking key words in the texts). It is also necessary, as it is done at present, to try to present research results in clear-cut categories (for example, give names to the ways of adaptation used by the subjects investigated).

The resolution of the problems resulting from the complexity of political science research does not, however, entirely solve the problems connected with the scope of scholarly research conducted at political science institutions, including the UMCS Faculty of Political Science. In most of them there are departments concerned with journalism and social communication, which entail the existence of such a field of study or at least specialization. This means that in political science institutions research is conducted in a not yet officially approved but actually existing separate discipline: 'media science and social communication'. This discipline today is in the same situation as political science was at its beginning stage. There are no possibilities of getting a degree in it in Poland. Media science students usually defend their dissertations before the Councils of Institutes of Political Science, getting their degrees in this field. This is a largely artificial solution: the dissertations defended often have nothing to do with political science. However, this is now unavoidable and requires a certain degree of patience and understanding on the part of those members of Institute or Faculty Councils who are not associated with media science. They must understand that the germs of a new discipline are beginning to form within political science institutions. The academic staff practicing it should specialize in media science or communicology investigations: conduct seminars, write papers and obtain degrees in this area. Otherwise, not only will the development of the discipline be blocked but also the field of study or even specialization as part of political science will be endangered. It may cease to exist *inter alia* because it will not be attractive to students. Journalistic specialization students at the Faculty of Political Science choose it among others because they are fed up with one political science program. If we were to make them write MA theses in politics then pursuing a specialization in journalism will largely make no sense to them (that this opinion is true can be easily verified by an opinion poll). An alternative to the elimination (decline) of this field of study and specialization may easily be the takeover of it (possibly with some of the academic staff) by another faculty or by the establishment of a new institution.

I therefore consider it desirable to admit of considerable freedom in selecting the subjects of MA theses written in this field of study/specialization, or at least to abolish the requirement of 'political science purity'. Strictly speaking, this proposal applying to specialization as the separate character of the field of study (*licencjat* or bachelor's degree) is indisputable and any discussion on the 'political-scienceness' of dissertations prepared in this field is pointless.

The same applies to the books and articles written at the Faculty of Political Science. Although no one has made any objections or reproof that the academic staff at the Faculty write non-political-science studies, yet in view of the repeated statements on the need to retain 'political science purity', we may expect conflicts also in this area (the extreme case would be to curtail the financing of the publication of 'impure' books with the Faculty's funds). I believe we may easily prevent them by firmly and clearly legitimating this line of research. The

formal expression of it might be to change the Faculty's name into, for example, the 'Faculty of Political Science (International Relations) and Social Communication'.

This would also be justified by conducting doctoral and postdoctoral procedures in media science before the Council of Political Science Faculty. It would be rather schizophrenic if the academic staff could publish works in communication, later scrupulously included in the achievements of the Faculty and its Departments but could not obtain degrees on this basis. We should enable them to do this as much as we can.

#### O CZYSTOŚCI BADAŃ POLITOLOGICZNYCH POLEMICZNIE

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł jest głosem w toczonej na Wydziale Politologii UMCS dyskusji nt. pożądanego zakresu prac badawczych i dydaktycznych. Autor opowiada się przeciwko dążeniu do „czystości” badań politologicznych. Dowodzi, że zarówno na poziomie kadr, jak na poziomie struktur, czy wreszcie na poziomie metodologii placówki politologiczne w Polsce funkcjonują w zróżnicowany sposób, korzystając przy tym z dorobku innych dyscyplin. Co ważniejsze, „czysta politologia” nie może istnieć, wszechstronne badanie zjawisk politycznych wymaga bowiem interdyscyplinarnych badań, do których prowadzenia potrzebne są kompetencje właściwe wielu naukom, jak językoznawstwo, prawo, filozofia, historia, socjologia czy psychologia. Nie należy więc ograniczać zakresu badań, czy stosowanych metod badawczych. Należy natomiast dbać o wysoki poziom merytoryczny prac.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dyscypliny naukowe, politologia, badania