

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE. SELECTED METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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Summary. Political science and contemporary history have many methodological and research problems in common because the two sciences share the object of research, which is the contemporary society in all forms and on all levels of its functioning. Both disciplines investigate social facts/processes that have occurred and are possibly 'in progress' as part of a larger or smaller structure of historical process. These facts have an open character: they are at the stage of evolution and their final effects are not known. The historian studying contemporary history and the political scientist must be aware of the ontological determinants that limit the process of investigating the present time. These constraints are the subject of the present paper.

Contemporary history and science of politics are disciplines close to each other regardless of the institutional and organizational boundaries that separate them. The two sciences are located on one research 'platform', analyzing different aspects of the reality just passed, supporting each other with the results of their investigations and methodological and practical experiences.

Key words: political science, science of politics, history, contemporary history, methodology

Two different tendencies can be noticed in present-day science: one of them is oriented towards the interdisciplinary research approach, while the other, as if in response to this process, is manifested in seeking a new identity for the already existing disciplines. At the same time in the social sciences there is 'peculiar' competition for which of the sciences is to play the leading role in the total cognition of reality. Among the disciplines competing for this role there are inter alia history and political science. As early as at the turn of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the well-known methodologist Jerzy Topolski wrote that „high stakes are being played for”, the issue being

which of the social sciences will contribute an integral point of view to the research on society. History? Sociology? Social psychology? The catchword of the unity of science conceived of in a hierarchical way is being replaced more and more definitively by the idea of integration of science, which assumes the equality of all sciences and postulates as close relations as possible between

them. The issue is that history should find its right place among the processes which govern modern science.¹

The author of this quotation does not mention political science at all because this discipline was only a fledgling one at that time in Poland, yet today it is established firmly enough to find for itself an important place among political/social sciences. B. Krauz-Mozer writes,

Political sciences are a synthesis of many disciplines – often with different, diversified methodologies of the subjects – which deal with everything that is politically important. This is a too broad and ambitious objective for political science to be perceived as a separate, homogeneous discipline with its own methodology, which is why this name is used somewhat liberally, with its future development in mind. But it is owing to this fact that in political science, like in no other discipline, there is manifested the fundamental unity regarding the object of research of social sciences, followed by common research problems, which methodology *sensu largo* analyzes and tries to solve. Thus, whatever is important that general methodology of science ascertains regarding the conditions of cognition in one social discipline is also significant for all the others².

The consequence of the conviction about the unity of the object of research of all social sciences is the proposal to define the identity of political science as a meeting *platform* for political theory, political philosophy, economic politics, social politics, theory of state, political sociology, international relations theory, political geography, political history and other disciplines that deal with various aspects of the functioning of the authority in society³. With the conception of political science so conceived its identity is not determined by its separate methodology or organizational-institutional criteria but by the object of research, which is society and the state with socio-political relations and institutions. This means that depending on the subject matter investigated, the political scientist should follow the guidelines developed by the methodologies of such disciplines as sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, law and other sciences. Among these sciences, political science is especially closely associated with history. This is genetic affinity (political science in People's Poland was jointly developed first of all by law and history graduates⁴) and affinity in research⁵. The research area where the historian and the political scientist meet is contemporary history. As one of the oldest sciences, history has vast methodological experience and those pursuing political science should take advantage of its achieve-

¹ J. Topolski, *Metodologia historii* (Methodology of history), Warsaw 1971, p. 8–9.

² B. Krauz-Mozer, *Teorie polityki* (Political theories), Warsaw 2005, p. 15.

³ See the text authored by J. Hudzik in the present volume.

⁴ For example, the UMCS Inter-Faculty Department of Political Science, the unit, from which the present Faculty of Political Science originated, employed five faculty members with a degree in history and six with a degree in law.

⁵ For example, Prof. Andrzej Paczkowski is both a historian and political scientist employed at the Polish Academy of Sciences Institute of Political Sciences.

ments in this area. The purpose of the present article is to present the specific properties of research on the present time, formulated on the basis of methodology of history. At this point I would like to distance myself from the view expressed by some representatives of science of politics that history is an auxiliary science of political science⁶. This interpretation hierarchizes relations between the two disciplines and it would mean that history subordinates its research objectives to political science, which is not the case. The mutual relation of history and political science is probably best expressed as mutually supporting sciences.

From the chronological point of view, the difference between the historian and the political scientist is negligible. Both of them investigate social facts that already occurred and may possibly 'last' as part of a larger or smaller structure of historical process, the political scientist remaining oriented towards the future and subordinating his inquiry to it in the first place, while the historian looks for the roots of today in that which passed. This close encounter of political science and contemporary history is best rendered by the expression 'history recorded as it happens' (in German *Zeitgeschichte*, and in French *histoire contemporaine*).

Anthony Giddens goes even further in his conclusions on relations between social sciences and history. He states that they differ in nothing that would be conceptually cohesive and intellectually justified. He then adds that „historical research is social research and vice versa”⁷.

For the sake of discussion presented in this text, we adopt the conception of contemporary history as proposed by J. Topolski. By „Dzieje Najnowsze” he writes,

I understand therefore the so-called current, present history and history going more or less backwards. This 'more or less' does not depend, however, ... on an arbitrary chronological decision but on certain problems pertaining to the structure of historical process. The problem ... is the opening or closing historical facts (processes). (...) A (comparatively) closed historical fact is one that is manifested in the historical process in its relative completeness, i.e. one which not only took place completely but also showed its direct and to some extent indirect effects so that one could give one's opinion about its place (role) in the historical process⁸.

According to the presented definition, contemporary history is a period in the history of society characterized by the occurrence of open facts/processes, i.e. being in evolution, whose eventual consequences are not yet known. Neverthe-

⁶ M. Chmaj, M. Żmigrodzki, *Wprowadzenie do teorii polityki* (Introduction to political theory), Lublin 1996, p. 25.

⁷ A. Giddens, *Stanowienie społeczeństwa. Zarys teorii strukturyzacji* (transl. from *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*), Poznań 2003, p. 410.

⁸ J. Topolski, *O trudnościach metodologicznych historii najnowszej* (On methodological difficulties of contemporary history) „Dzieje Najnowsze” 1961, R. XIII, no. 1–2, p. 313. This openness of contemporary history is pointed out by the British scholar Geoffrey Barraclough, who writes, „Contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape”. See: G. Barraclough, *Wstęp do historii współczesnej* (transl. from *Introduction to Contemporary History*), Warsaw 1971, p. 32.

less, we cannot perceive these facts in isolation and it is the scholar's task to interpret them in a broader context, as a fragment of a larger structure, the investigation of which can be fragmentary or even wrong. The lack of a cognitive perspective or the necessary temporal distance to the phenomena investigated is regarded as the essential difficulty, with which those studying the present time have to grapple, and so do political scientists.

In order that a given phenomenon could occur before us in a vivid way – Adam Próchnik writes – it must stand out not only as a separate fact but also a historical one, i.e. understood in connection with other facts. It is not enough to observe a fact, one should find out its influence and consequences. This is why the historian has to have this distance. Now, this distance between a fact and its impact, between a historical event and its consequences is huge in many different ways. Depending on this remoteness in time, the distance that the historian needs to write history may be greater or smaller⁹.

The same scholar wrote elsewhere „It is not easy to write the history of the present (...) It is difficult to develop a perspective from which to look at events and tell the significant from the petty ones ...”¹⁰. For example, an insignificant event, which was a meeting of a dozen-odd socialist activists in Paris in 1892, gave rise to a powerful movement of independence socialism. Its role is visible only after many years. Conversely, Stauffenberg's attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944 might have appeared to be an important event at the time, but today we can say that it did not affect the course of the war or the internal situation in Germany. Both the contemporary history scholar and the political scientist must be aware of the ontological determinants that limit the process of cognition of the present.

The open character of facts and events taking place, the limited temporal distance from them or the lack of it are the factors that generate a series of further methodological problems. The Lublin methodologist Jan Pomorski names eight other features rendering the specificity of contemporary history, which distinguish it methodologically from the history that deals with earlier periods¹¹. It is my conviction that we can also apply these observations to relations between the political scientist and the object of his research. When we adjust them from the political science angle, these will be problems related to the following areas of research activity:

1. The source base and the scholar's attitude to sources.
2. The political scientist's attitude to popular knowledge about politics and the functioning of institutions of socio-political and economic life.

⁹ A. Próchnik, *O dziele odbudowy państwa polskiego* (On the work of restoration of the Polish state) „Niepodległość”, vol. IV, fasc. 1, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Idem*, *Pierwsze piętnastolecie Polski niepodległej* (The first fifteen years of independent Poland), Warsaw 1983, p. 8.

¹¹ J. Pomorski, *Metodologiczne problemy historii najnowszej* (Methodological problems of contemporary history), „Przegląd Humanistyczny” 1987, no. 9, p. 2.

3. The instrumental treatment of historical and political knowledge.
4. 'Partisanship' and objectivism in research.
5. The role of theory in political science research.
6. Cooperation in the process of cognition of reality with other social sciences, including contemporary history.
7. The use of latest research techniques.
8. Cognitive progress conceived of as accumulation of factual knowledge.

In the following part of the article we shall briefly present the problems signaled in particular points.

Re 1. Contemporary civilization is a mass society, which also translates into the source base available to the political scientist and the historian studying contemporary history. The amount of all kinds of materials produced by central and local government institutions, and by parties and associations is growing at an astronomical rate. Take for example the productions of the Polish Parliament during the Third Republic (i.e. the last fifteen years): the volume of legislation passed in 2005 was higher than in 1990. Finding one's way around in this maze of materials makes it immensely difficult for the scholar to become acquainted with all of them in order to get at those that are the most essential in the cognition of the social, political or economic reality. Therefore, the scholar sometimes confines himself to partial research and on this basis he formulates general conclusions. He behaves like a politician who identifies his own positions with the aspirations of the majority of the nation or society. Too many sources make themselves less valuable than they are for the medievalist (the law of supply and demand operates in this case). As a result, the political scientist confines himself to a fairly superficial analysis of the source content, thus diminishing the importance of his internal and external criticism and hermeneutical processing¹².

Until recently a serious impediment for the scholar investigating the contemporary period was the limited access to valuable materials stored in state archives and the archives of institutions and offices. At present, as a result of the rise of e-communication, this problem looks much better. Websites provide documentation showing the activities of political parties, Council of Ministers and other government agencies. On the one hand, we are witnessing the publicizing of the knowledge about the functioning of the authority, while on the other hand, the decision-making process and the essence of phenomena are becoming less and less clear because of globalization; they can thereby be described, investigated and understood only in the light of the sources to which the scholar is confined because some of them are out of his reach.

The political scientist, sociologist or contemporary history specialist do not have to be left exclusively to second-hand sources but can themselves inspire their creation. As A. Giddens put it, actors who are of interest to the sociologist

¹² J. Pomorski, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

are the living ones and can be communicated with, and the living, unlike the dead, can answer the questions asked and can ask them themselves¹³.

Re 2. The political scientist, like the student of contemporary history, has to cope with popular knowledge in his society regarding politics (for example that it is an amoral activity, the struggle for power and money), perception of historical processes (conspiracy theories of history), or widespread cures for the existing socio-economic problems. Politics is a realm of life, about which everybody or almost everybody feels qualified enough to speak. This is the core of democracy, joined in also by the student of the existing social reality. It sometimes happens that he does not have the courage to defy the 'pressure' of the functioning stereotypes or myths, or subconsciously yields to them. B. Krauz-Mozer is probably quite right when she writes that

the skills needed in specialized academic disciplines, whose research activities can support or undermine widely-held popular political convictions, are still closely related to the skills of ordinary observers of and participants in public life. In order to gain the right to enter political science ... one does not need to learn complicated research procedures or intricate ways of reasoning, on the contrary, the political science knowledge starts to imperceptibly mix today with popular common sense¹⁴.

Instead of yielding to the influences of popular knowledge, the task of political science is to overcome divergences existing between them and contribute to understanding socio-economic processes taking place.

Re 3. Political scientists fairly often study contemporary history and are then exposed to temptations to use the knowledge of the recent past for the purpose of present political struggle. This happened both in People's Republic and in present-day Poland. Today, in the Third Republic of Poland we are witnessing some scholars, pursuing contemporary history and political science at the same time, join in the political discourse concerning such issues as decommunization, vetting (lustration), privatization, the nature of the Round Table agreement, building the Fourth Republic, etc. This does not mean that these people should not undertake research in this area but the problem is that they sometimes treat these issues in a too emotional way, becoming involved in the ongoing political struggle and manipulating facts and figures. The vision of the past is sometimes created with a view to legitimating conceptions formulated by diverse political circles. When explaining the existing reality, the political scientist feels obliged to indicate causal relationships by going back to history, from which he can draw arguments justifying or challenging some actions or other, or political strategies (e.g. for historical politics). Using the genetic method we seek justification for political reasons in history, but also for projects of the future in the present. Instrumentalization of political science stems to some extent from the functions it

¹³ A. Giddens, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

¹⁴ B. Krauz-Mozer, *op. cit.* p. 9.

is to fulfill as science, but those who pursue it must remember to avoid becoming addicted to politics. It is political science that should influence politics and not the other way round, it cannot afford to be controlled by the latter. Politics has many means, including financial, of influencing science and instrumentalizing it.

Re 4. The problem of 'partisanship' and necessary objectivity in scholarly research concerns both contemporary history specialists and political scientists and is associated with the issues analyzed in point 3. The question of 'partisanship' can be examined on two levels. In the first case, it is conceived of as the scholar's orientation towards specific political forces, which eventually results in pursuing pseudoscience and in the subordination of his research to a given political reason. This attitude arouses criticism in the circles representing individual disciplines and tends to be termed 'court science'. A more complex question is 'partisanship' situated on the second level because it stems not so much from political sympathies as from certain *a priori* or tacitly accepted, as J. Pomorski puts it, „ontological, methodological and axiological assumptions preceding research itself”¹⁵. One's system of values controls research, it can influence the choice of the subject matter, selection of sources and facts, assessment of events and social phenomena investigated, and their significance and meaning as well as the conclusions and generalizations arrived at. In practice, this means identifying with some of the functioning ideologies or worldviews, philosophical currents and the resulting axiologies. It is through the prism of the values which they advocate that the past and the present are perceived and the visions of the future are presented. Most scientific disciplines are threatened by 'ideologization', especially those that pursue social studies. This is a serious methodological problem but of the kind that seems impossible to solve basing on contemporary history or political science. The aforementioned Adam Próchnik, referring to his book presenting the history of the first fifteen years of the Second Republic of Poland, recorded in a 'live' way in the rush of ongoing events, answers his question whether to stay impartial in the following way:

There is no ideal impartiality, everybody views history from some position. In expressing his opinion, in selecting facts, or in assessing events, the historian cannot depart from the platform he is standing on. He cannot forget his worldview even if he pretended to himself that he is doing so. But if there is no absolute objectivity, then relative objectivity is possible and necessary in a scholarly study. Simply temperance. We wish to try and make a detached, impassionate judgment about people and events. For it is not its purpose to serve political agitation and propaganda¹⁶.

¹⁵ J. Pomorski, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ A. Próchnik, *op. cit.*, p. 9. A contemporary methodologist A. Radomski writes: „The historian, as the contemporary 'theoretical reflection' maintains, cannot be impartial in his interpretations of history. As every member of society he has definite beliefs, which control his activities – also as part of historiographic practice – and which he cannot abandon”, A. Radomski, *Historiografia w postnowoczesnych, liberalnych demokracjach* (Historiography in postmodern liberal democracies) [in:] *Światopoglądy historiograficzne* (Historiographic worldviews), (ed.) J. Pomorski, Lublin 2002, p. 194.

Today's historians of the present and political scientists would be well advised to remember about the counsel offered in this citation.

Re 5. Discussions relating to political science about its status, that is whether it is a separate discipline or the area of research realized by representatives of different social sciences (political sociology, political philosophy, social psychology, law, economics, contemporary history, etc.) which study the existing reality from the perspective of their own methodologies, are essentially reducible to the problem of political theory. Diverse conceptions of political theory have functioned in the literature to date: most often it is identified with social and philosophical ideas. B. Krauz-Mozer, an eminent expert on these problems, offers the following diagnosis:

Consequently, that which tends to be called 'theory' in political science at present often does not have the scholarly nature but is a label denoting many different systems of knowledge about politics. It is therefore good to be aware of the fact that when political scientists speak of 'theory', they use this term in an arbitrary way, differing from the usual use of the term in other sciences not interested in investigating social phenomena¹⁷.

The absence of a crystallized stance on this matter causes political science to lack distinctive identity, while the studies produced in its realm are of contributory or historical-descriptive nature. An important problem, which many political scientists have to grapple with, mainly in the sphere of contemporary history, is the conceptualization of the object of research.

Re 6. In the social sciences circles there is a widespread conviction about the growing need to conduct interdisciplinary studies and cooperate between individual disciplines. The object of research, which is the socio-political reality, is multi-dimensional and the comparatively exhaustive description, interpretation, and explanation of it fall outside the cognitive capabilities of only one discipline. The same fact, phenomenon or process should be viewed from many standpoints (research perspectives) and various analytic instruments appropriate for particular methodologies should be applied. This means that representatives of individual disciplines ought to be interested in one another's results and achievements and take them into account in the research process. Another form of cooperation is to undertake joint research projects and to enrich one's scholarly apparatus with new research methods and techniques employed by related sciences. The conceptions of treating political science as the *discursive platform* attribute to it a unifying role in relation to disciplines whose field of research embraces various aspects of political reality. It remains a mystery how political science should perform this function if it ceases to be a real entity and becomes a synthesis of sub disciplines meeting on the platform.

¹⁷ B. Krauz-Mozer, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

Re 7. Political science as an interdisciplinary science has to use many different research methods and techniques depending on the subject matter undertaken. A disturbing tendency can be observed, especially among scholars undertaking research on contemporary history and the functioning of government system institutions, that they confine themselves to traditional methods of text analysis. We then obtain the picture of reality isolated from the whole of the socio-political system. Postmodernist philosophy of knowledge admittedly places emphasis on discovering diversity in the pluralist society, nevertheless, science cannot evade looking for that which communities share together and for historical regularities or generalities. Therefore, statistical and sociological methods should be used on a larger scale as they enable investigation of mass processes. Here the computer creates opportunities that previous scholars never had.

Re 8. With the collapse of People's Poland, political science as a branch of knowledge gained new opportunities for development. It shed the previously constraining straitjacket of Marxist methodology and started to draw from the achievements of this discipline in the Western countries, acquiring new approaches in the interpretation of political phenomena. This was accompanied at the same time by the growing interest in undergraduate political science studies among high school students. Owing to this popularity, more and more state universities and the emergent private colleges started to offer programs in political science. These were followed by the growing numbers of young academic staff specializing in political science. As a result of these processes as well as the launching of doctoral study programs on a larger scale, there was a dramatic increase in the number of people holding a doctoral degree in political science. We may expect that this increase will be even more dynamic because the Bologna strategy provides for the three-tier structure of higher education: licentiate (bachelor's degree) studies, master's degree studies, and doctoral studies. I have serious doubts whether the 'mass' trend towards doctoral studies is the right solution because education for research work cannot be carried out in the way occupational training is done, especially in a comparatively short period. Already today we can notice the worrying phenomenon of producing a vast number of contributory dissertations, which multiply the knowledge of facts, or compilation studies reducible to the presentation of the content of sources, not always complete, and of the literature on the subject. We are witnessing the rush to get a doctoral degree by the people from outside the academic circles, whose methodological training is at the level of popular knowledge of politics or history. Already in the early nineteen-eighties Jerzy Topolski observed that „it was recognized as obvious that you could not essentially give medical treatment to people without proper training but it was accepted that history, which after all concerns that which everybody experiences and participates in, does not require

special training to pursue it”¹⁸. This observation, although stated more than twenty years ago, has not lost relevance and we can still apply it to certain areas of political science, within which we are witnessing the appearance of books of dubious cognitive and scientific value.

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History in general (and contemporary history in particular) and political science share many common methodological and research problems because the two branches of learning have the joint object of research, which is society in all forms and on all levels of its functioning. The two disciplines have equally limited possibilities of cognition of reality as the phenomena investigated are open to a greater or lesser extent. They can therefore make use of each other in explaining and understanding the political reality without fear of losing their identity. At present we are witnessing the successful occupation with contemporary history by political scientists, and with political science problems by historians. Regardless of their institutional-organizational affiliation and formal position in the structure of social sciences, they are students of both disciplines.

HISTORIA NAJNOWSZA A POLITOLOGIA. WYBRANE PROBLEMY METODOLOGICZNE

Streszczenie. Pomiedzy politologią a historią najnowszą istnieje wiele wspólnych problemów metodologicznych i badawczych, albowiem obie te nauki łączy przedmiot badań, jakim jest współczesne społeczeństwo we wszystkich formach i płaszczyznach funkcjonowania. Jedna i druga dyscyplina zajmuje się badaniami faktów społecznych/procesów, które się zdarzyły i które ewentualnie „trwają” jako część mniejszej lub większej struktury procesu historycznego. Fakty te mają charakter otwarty, znajdują się w fazie ewolucji, a ich skutków docelowych nie znamy. Historyk dziejów najnowszych i politolog musi być świadom ontologicznych uwarunkowań ograniczających proces poznawania współczesności. Ograniczenia te są przedmiotem niniejszego artykułu.

Historia najnowsza i nauka o polityce są dyscyplinami bliskimi sobie, niezależnie od oddzielających je granic instytucjonalno-organizacyjnych. Obie nauki sytuują się na jednej „platformie” badawczej, poddając analizie różne aspekty niedawno minionej rzeczywistości, posiłkując się wzajemnie wynikami swych dociekań i doświadczeniami metodologiczno-warsztatowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: politologia, nauka o polityce, historia, historia najnowsza, metodologia

¹⁸ J. Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej* (Theory of historical knowledge), Poznań 1983, p. 153; see also J. Pomorski, *op. cit.* 8–9. This scholar even contends that in contemporary history like „in no other department of historiography it is so easy to cross the line between the professional and the amateurish, which is why ... there are plenty of doctoral dissertations, and not so infrequently postdoctoral dissertations written by all manner of ‘lovers of history’.”