



NORMATIVE COMMITMENT OF THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

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— ABSTRACT —

Basic thesis of the article is the claim, that contemporary development-trends of theoretical reflection about politics show ideological associations of a slightly different character and in dimensions separate from those previously connected with classical philosophy of politics. As in the classical form of reflection normative involvement indeed stemmed from care about common well being and urge to search for ideal order model and social organization, current trends of development of political theory – especially postmodernistic influences on social sciences – indicate new forms of bonds with political axiology.

— KEYWORDS —

normative theory, political philosophy, postpositivist thought

Former, to date attempts (referring to the traditional, scientific and naturalistic model of knowledge) to formulate an objective and independent perspective of the political sphere of social life has proved rather imperfect and encounters numerous cognitive barriers that are hard to overcome. Current criticism of this model of scientific inquiry based on a formalized and axiologically uncommitted reflection describe the faith in possibility of acquiring knowledge in a neutral manner as a form of scientific myth. As claimed by Mary Hawkesworth (2006: 48) in reality, the traditional model of political science tends to conceal axiologically committed part of the research performed in political science and does, in effect, reduce the scope of political theory itself. It also discounts axi-

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ological connotations of the presupposed assumptions, which precede any form of research in political science. Taking into account this dimension of political theory reveals its close connotations with philosophical, sociological and also psychological legacy.

In consequence, the assumption that the cognitive value of judgment formulated in accordance with established ethical interpretations does not possess the status of scientific reflection oriented towards the search of truth and acquiring objective perspective on reality, is currently decreasing in popularity and is being increasingly put into doubt. Bearing in mind the influence of postmodernism, the observation that reflection about politics (or, in broader sense, about society altogether) is not, in its core, objectively dispassionate, axiologically neutral and ideologically uninvolved analysis becomes increasingly obvious. Rather, it ought to be treated like an authorial interpretation which, in a process of the scientific 'treating' or academic discourse, at most reaches the shape of intersubjective perspective or diagnosis of the reality.

The origins of this trend can be traced back to the 1960s, when the broader interests of behaviourists on normative reflection became noticeable and arguments raised by Leo Strauss, Eric Vogelin and Hannah Arendt among others undermined modernist pillars of American liberalism (Gunnell 1993: 189–187). Up until that time, normatively-oriented scientists were decisively marginalized and their legacy most frequently ignored among academic community. Scientism was dominant to such an extent, that tradition of normative political theory "have not been inclined to take the description of political sciences at face value" (Dryzek, Honig, Phillips 2008: 7). In the course of research on local politics, as indicated by Peter J. Steinberger (1985: 3–4), behaviourism became a peculiar ideology of the political science, as directed by research patterns in Robert Dahl's studies on structure of governance in New Haven.

A pronounced change in attitude towards axiologically-involved reflection occurred after announcement of manifesto of the postbehavioural political studies propounded by David Easton (1969: 1051–1061). Despite the fact, that desiderata of the new fields of empirical research contained in the above manifesto did not mean the withdrawal from the rigours of methodological regime, a postulated reclaim of the political science in its protection of humanistic values, decisively brought out the awareness of axiological importance of political theory. Another crucial change was an inclusion of the quality methods in the process of research (Dahl 2007: 122–124). Although an apparent mismatch between philosophy and scientifically formulated theory of politics persisted, as time passed, presumably

these tendencies allowed, to the high extent, for proximity of the normative theory and empirical tradition. B. Guy Peters (2005: 159–160) claims that current neo-institutionalism, combining considerations of the normative nature with description and clarification of conduct of political entities typical for behavioural approach, offers a multi-layered analysis of politics that includes numerous aspects, contexts and dimensions as well as forms of its manifestation.

The ideas of science freed from axiological involvement were finally disproved by criticisms raised in the 1980^s and influences of postpositivistic ideas of political theories (Lane 1997: 159–160). Indeed, it was the merit of postpositivists to emphasize, that the noun experience, the verb to experience and the adjective empirical cannot be transferred from one theoretical system to another without the change in their meaning and connotations. From this perspective, the importance of presuppositions and their persuasive effect on the content of theories and research attitudes of postbehaviourists (Hawkesworth 1988: 184–194) was highlighted.

A contemporary reversion towards normatively involved reflection is not, however, a straightforward turn towards classical political thought, but is expressed in different, more sophisticated forms. Simultaneously, current premises of the return to axiological perspective are not only consequences of modifications of political practice, but are also the result of growth of theoretical polycentrism in political research. These issues are emphasized by Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (1996: 3) who claim that diversification and specialization of political research are phenomena indicating the crucial trends of evolution of modern political science. It seems that this tendency of highlighting axiological function of political theory can be related to three key trends: broadening of the term ‘politics’ on various spheres of social life and development in a subject range of political theory, distinction of new fields and research problems but also increasing opening of political scientists for meta-theoretical and philosophical contemplation and related normative reflection.

At the same time, tendencies towards broadening of the subject-range of contemporary political theory can be related with at least two phenomena. On one hand, they are a direct consequence of theoretical pluralism which, including a broad spectrum of various interpretations of politics, implies an elaborated form of separation in research field of political science. On the other hand, it is related to modifications in theoretical nature of reflection over politics, which extends from traditional mid-range framework to the current – metatheoretical level of generalization. Both of these phenomena are undoubtedly connected

with a distinctive, for postpositivistic breakthrough, process of broader opening of political science for modern intellectual movements or philosophical ideas (Nocoń 2010).

Metatheoretical reflection also includes the idea of holistic political theory, creating something resembling a mummified political theory that combines the empirical and normative claims into one. This idea, despite its vestigial form, is still present in the contemporary political, discursive polemics (H. F. Weisberg 2003: 3). The attempts of its formulation in its integral-synthetic frames of metatheory, favours the tendencies towards politicizing of the broad catalogue of social life spheres through holistic conceptualizations of politics.

These tendencies, to generalize theoretical reflection in political science, are related with conviction that the essence of scientific knowledge relies on the creation of organized, consistent and holistic image of the world, and not only on description of detached fragments. In this context, political theory to the increasing extent formulates nomological theses searching for universal generalizations and not only historical and empirical synthesis. In this way, contemporary political theory is being enriched with speculative reflection that, compared with descriptive statements, undertakes the research based on conditional claims and hypotheses formulated a priori. This trend also created favourable conditions for broader opening of the theory on axiologically involved reflection. Undoubtedly, the social problems and turmoil have also contributed to, as Louis Herman calls it, the crisis of contemporaneity, which requires the return of political science to their roots in order to seek the truth. According to this American philosopher a research of that sort should be based upon empirical knowledge and broad generalizations formulated in accordance with multicultural global research that uses also historical legacy of political science. This research formula will allow for the search of more universal conceptions of contemporary common well being derived from a broad-ranged, methodologically diversified and simultaneously integral results (Herman 1998: 23–43).

Thereby, it does not only broaden the range of what is described as normative theory but also highlights its internal diversification. Catherine and Michel Zuckert (1997: 144) indicate three general forms of contemporary normative reflexion: one group of theorists is described as “revitalist doctrines” which returned to old traditions of thought and political analysis. Typical representatives of this group are Hannah Arendt, Alasdair McIntyre and Leo Strauss. Different group of theorists, who can be described as “restorations”, attempts to recover more or less contemporarily acknowledged system of political thought

related to modern liberal philosophy. Works of John Rawls, but also Ronald Dworkin, William Galston and Robert Nozick play a special role in this enterprise. A third group of theorists are “the rebels” (overturners), radical innovators often perceived as enfant terribles of the academic community. Among them one can find postmodernists, deconstructivists, representatives of feminism and followers of the new form of theoreticising such as Michael Foucault, Jack Derrida, Richard Rorty and Iris Young related to those. Despite the fact, that all three groups of theorists differ significantly from one another in crucial matters, they are unified in their retreat from the main rules of empirical political science represented by Harold Lasswell or David Easton. Differences between traditional model of political science are visible in every three dimensions of intellectual activity of research. It entails a bigger openness for speculative reflection and impressionistic form of expression, a tendency to include normative involvement of political theory and reversal towards clarifying and axiological function of description in political science.

From this perspective, the intricacies in development of contemporary political theory do not mean a straightforward return to classical normative reflection. Axiological involvement of postpositivistic theory of politics does not, however, result from its metaphysical inclinations. It is especially apparent in the case of comparison between trends relating to philosophical classics with interpretative approach inspired by postmodernistic ideas. Steve Buckler claims that interpretationists make an assumption that the world becomes comprehensible thanks to discursively agreed conventions that have a nature of intersubjective convictions and do not possess any axiological premises. In this way, despite their approval of legitimization of research formulated within the frames of classical normative theory, they accept to some extent, positivistic criticism of its metaphysical foundations (Buckler 2002: 179–180).

Another persona indicating distinctness in postpositivistic reflection about politics is Ryszard Skarżyński (2004: 49–50). It can stem from the general worldview expressing the projective attitude towards reality based upon conviction that the role of knowledge and researchers is to enrich the social world with higher values. That sort of involvement is typical for different trends in philosophy. The second type of involvement is connected with comprehension of normativism as a peculiar theory according to which norms are universal factor setting benchmarks of governance and political order. Depending on assumptions of specific conceptions, the norms derive from forces independent from human will or are its expression. This distinction axiologically assigns the involvement typical

for normative political theory *sensu stricte* and also, in the broader meaning, the type of involvement which expresses the natural propensity of researchers to evaluate political actions with regard to the effects they have in practice.

At the same time, the fact both important and attention-worthy is that the latter, broader type of encompassing normativism reflects the way in which every political theory indicates limited axiological context. However, it is not so much connected with philosophical research as much as with ideological associations. Indeed, in its source, each vision of society simultaneously contains the image of its political organization, fundamental regulations of which can be directly or indirectly linked with determined axiological system setting down the ideological orientation of the given theory. It is emphasized by Murray Edelman who demonstrates in his analysis that political theories, similarly to all theories, can serve the purpose of clarification, as well as political aims. (Edelman 1997: 101). In this context, the most formalized figures of political theory, even those referring to positivistic-empirical perspective, can be judged in terms of their ideological overtone as far as the aspect are concerned. A good example of such practice are arguments formulated by Thodor Adorno and Maks Horkheimer among other, who argue a possibility of totalitarian connotations that are carried by positivistic philosophy. These researchers, while analyzing the ideological dimension of positivism indicate that characteristic, for this standpoint, scientific perception of the world, imposes upon the society living within, the aims indicated by impersonal causal mechanisms over which they do not possess control. In this way people become imprisoned within mechanisms and social processes deprived of moral value (Buckler 2002: 3; Berlin 1991: 86–78).

In this way, a renewed inclusion of political theory into the sphere of ontological and epistemic, as well as normative postulates succeeds previous – relatively well-outlined – borders between theory, political philosophy and ideology (Goodin 1988: 17–27). From this perspective, a relation between political theory and ideological ground of political action are far from obvious. For instance, on one hand, the majority of researches agree that the directions of development of American political science was to a big extent influenced by pragmatism so characteristic for liberal culture of political democracy (Anderson 1983: 398). On the other hand, a broad stream of research showing connections between theory and political practice opts for their closeness. One of the most current research programmes in this field is the range of the influence of ecophilosophy and ecological social movements on politics in a global dimension (Graham 1998:

73–90). Based on these interactions, Kari Palonen (2005: 351–366) develops the thesis that theoreticians do not only play the role of ideologists, but also politicians play the role of theoreticians. It results from special competences of political actors that diagnose reality in their own categories.

These are the ideological associations of political science that cause their occasional identification with the politics itself. The acceptance of diversification of equally established theoretical approaches and the temptation of relativization of cognitive processes related to them, give a big possibility of political manipulation. In a complex conglomerate of different forms of clarification, in which a deeper orientation is possessed only by experts occupied with the precise sphere, it is much easier to accomplish such an interpretation of research results or the assumption of given theory, which could realize the function of legitimization of certain political enterprises. Such an abuse of theory in political practice is fostered by the science itself, which provides effective tools of sociotechnical influence of both politicians and public opinion. By the same token, social research provides the knowledge which practical value gives a serious potential of reification of the human being.

These relations are reasons standing behind the difficulties in execution of postulates to separate science from politics. At the same time, the involvement in political practice of political scientists is often perceived as a factor devaluating its expert credibility. It is not always the case however. It seems worthwhile to quote the right observation of Mirosław Karwat (2004: 15) who writes that such postulates are a peculiar display of discrimination against political scientists. When it comes to the lawyers, and even more so with physicians (doctors), practical experience is not only a foundation of their scientific credibility but also an essential element of their professional advancement in the world of science.

Philosophy, in accordance with new trends, again enters into direct reactions with political practice. These relations differ, however, from classical philosophy. They are the form of rational conversation, axiological involvement of which indicates the influences among other factors, on basis of political activity, especially its normative legitimization of a certain vision of social order (Smith 2007: 1–17). This manner of characterizing relations of knowledge and ideology is indeed in contradiction with traditional model of science. An example of critique of this state of affairs is provided by Jonathan H. Turner (2004: 4), who relates to the views, where ideological involvement of social theory can be the consequence of acquired interests of the creators or be a result of conserva-

tive tendencies resulting from formulation of generalizations based on reality accessible to the researchers, which to the biggest extent, results in maintaining the status quo, rather than search of alternative solutions. This observation compliments with the remark that theoretical reflection does not often have the nature of scientific theory, but also includes forms of expression belonging to philosophical discourse and ideological connotations. From this perspective, the problem of separation of social theory from its ideological context is reduced to formal difficulty of separation between theory and philosophy (Hauptmann 2005: 207–218).

This conviction characteristic for traditional attitude maintains scientific relations between normatively oriented political theory and ideology. Independently from other factors differentiating these systems of claims, it takes into account that they both arise with completely different aims. Political theory is determined by reason, the urge to rationally strive for execution of values, which are not attributed to any interests of determined social groups. From this point of view, it is coined based on entirely different motives than ideology (O'Brien 1998: 77–90).

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