

The Possibility or Desirability of a Value Free Political Study, an Insight

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Abstract

This paper, succinctly but critically addresses the puzzling and burning question, which any political science scholar cannot avoid – whether a value-free approach in political studies/social sciences is either possible or desirable? In an attempt to answer this question, the paper briefly considers the contributions of scholars and commentators in political science and social sciences' disciplines, which either oppose or support this subject matter. However, the paper took a stand; it argues that a value-freedom political study (or social sciences) is neither possible nor desirable. The paper concluded categorically that though, the study of politics will not lose its scientific or philosophical character because it is value laden or normative. However those scholars who solicit for a political study that will be free of value, is not only simply engaging in challenging and herculean intellectual exercise, but also in an arid and fruitless one in that matter.

Key words: political-studies, value-free, value-laden, political-philosophy, behaviouralist, international relations, social sciences

Introduction

Some scholars of politics have been championing, advocating and campaigning that political studies should be made to circumvent the prejudice associated to political ideology. Being influenced by what they term as extremely unempirical, subjectivity, unscientific, non-philosophical, value-judgmental and non-justifiable of some subjects, they call for a value-free approach or scientific methodology to the study of politics. The presentation below attempts to look into and make a short, but vital contribution to this subject matter, which has become a matter of debate in the academic circle of politics and social sciences, particularly since the late 1950s.

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Barber captures this lingering contention concerning the changing pragmatic approach in the study of political science;

Throughout the 1950s, a period during which both hard social science and normative political philosophy made major inroads in the discipline, the debate about the nature of science and its role in the study of society was already growing. In the wake of World War II and its twin nightmares of totalitarianism and the holocaust, politics remained crucial to social science. But in the space of a single decade, the attractions of a political science that acquired its scientific credentials by moving away from the messiness of politics and embracing the seeming exactitude of terms such as “behavior” and “system” came to dominate, and methodology appeared to displace politics as the focus of political science.¹

Political studies, value-free or value laden?

2.1: value-free political studies

The question whether a value-free approach in political studies is either possible or desirable has been a lingering and continuous subject of great contention in the field of political science. That is to say, the argument for a study of political science that should be value-free is not novel or original to the twentieth century, but rather is as old as modern political thought, arguably if this can be dated from the Renaissance. This is when one of the leading authorities in political science (Niccolo Machiavelli), strive to achieve a position where he distinguishes the facts of political life from the values of life in general, in order to establish a value-free political theoretical approach. However, in other aspects or areas of Machiavelli's writings, as cited in Morrice, he appears to recognise the essence of values. This is because he values such ends as political accomplishment, the safeguarding and magnification of state power, political order and freedom.²

Since then, many political scholars and social sciences' writers and commentators have put forward a plausible argument that political or social sciences studies should be value-free. Their submission to acquire political studies that should be value-free is underpinned on their engrossed desire and serious attempts to present political studies on the pedestal of pure or natural science.

For example, scholars have argued that whatever else it is, political science must be the study of politics, and that political scientists ought to seek out methods appropriate to their subject rather than methods dictated by some appealingly scientific epistemological paradigm.³ However, Max Weber, one of the influential figures of value-free approach in the social sciences, centred his argument partly, from a radical or uncompromising distinction between the sphere of facts and the realm of values. This may be apparently captured in relation to Weber's view, as cited by Morrice, 'the realm of facts and the realm of values, the realm of science and the realm of judgment, are quite heterogeneous problems'.⁴ The import of Weber's view is that value-judgments are irrational, unscientific, unempirical and therefore wholly subjective or prejudiced; thus, these must be separated from the scientific study of society, – the science of society, which must be empirical and value-free.

2.2: value-laden political studies

However, the mere assertion that social science or political studies should be value-free can be taken to be a value-judgment itself. Actually, the study of politics, as Weber (in Kavanagh) appreciates is far from being value-free, being a horizon filled and permeated with values.⁵ More so, political scientist or social scientist whose opinion is value-freedom canvasses that the role of values in social or political science is to be deprecated as an impediment to truth, objectivity, clarity and rationality. However, a counter submission can be put forward in this pedestal that it is value that primarily gives meaning to social or political science. Just as Webb argues in this context, even if it were feasible that the specialty of political studies or social science could be value-free, it would be barren, arid, dry, sterile and unexciting.⁶

Therefore, values are indispensable to pinpoint what is seen as important for study in social issues and that study subsequently will assist to give meaning what is significance. So, values give meaning and significance to social science and political study. Also in this direction Weber opines, values must appear in the choice of topics for study, there is nothing as value-free selection. Weber (in Webb) writes: 'Order is brought in this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a part of concrete reality is interesting and significant to us, because only it is related to cultural values with which we approach reality'.⁷ Here, we see Weber identified the relevancy of values in selection of topics in social sciences, which apparently involve political studies. He is therefore, indirectly making value judgement.

Brief considerations of some branches of political studies

3.1: political philosophy, value issue and concept of justice

Even, within the contemporary political science, political philosophy is one branch of political studies that has maintained the position of value-freedom in its presentations. This claims that the philosopher searches for true knowledge of certainty or reality, honesty or goodness, or beauty and therefore that successful philosophical reasoning generate knowledge unlike the type, but on parity or the same level with the results of scientific research. However, argument is made that denounces the notion that philosophical analysis produces any ultimate knowledge of reality or goodness, rather philosophy is only capable to analyse language in order to organise linguistic mix up or remove philosophical rubbish. This does not in any way make them value-free or elevate them to a level above or superior to or different from many others within the discipline of political science broadly conceived.⁸ In fact, the recognition of value-pluralism, and therefore of irreconcilable moral disagreement (for example on the *concept of justice*), presents a problem specifically for political philosophy that claims the statue of value-free discipline.⁹

Cahn for example expresses dismay at any attempt to render a generally acceptable definition of the concept, justice. He writes, for about 200 years, political philosophers, jurists and philosophers alike have been depreciating the concept justice. Since the concept seems redundant to some of them, to others flatulent and hypocritical. Still others declare that it is a word without shape or meaning and a mere omission of noise.¹⁰ In fact, the norms which are employed as standard of justice vary from person to person, from group to group, being infiltrated or permeated with subjectivity and they are, thus, often mutually irreconcilable. It is impossible to establish the truth of the value judgements underlying these norms of justice on the basis of empirical facts.¹¹

3.2: political behaviour, value issue and ought/is questions

Similarly, the behaviouralists in their self-conceit have attempted to eschew or abstain from 'ought' questions and try to jettison value judgments, since they are much concerned with the 'is' or empirical questions. However, their work in reality is not value-free. As argued, a researcher's values and personal experience unavoidably influences his selection and definition of choice of discipline or branch of study, and even his research techniques, methods and his interpretations and presentations of data.¹² And to quote Kirk Russell, as cited in Issak:

'Although the complete behaviouralist may deny the existence of value-judgments and normative understandings, nevertheless he does not escape, in his researches, the influence of his own value-judgments'.¹³

3.3: international relations as complete science and value issue

The argument of value-freedom political studies has in fact influenced even twenty first century scholars and writers in social sciences. For example, Chelu, in his contribution to the 'future of international relations theory', argues that there is now, actually observation of a positive evolution in the fact that international relations (a branch of political studies in its broad sense, or social science discipline) is evolving towards a more inclusive and complete science – a science that can offer more correct and empirical answers at practical level.¹⁴ In reality, while it can be supported that all social sciences, including political studies is aiming and moving towards offering or providing more correct and concrete answers. Social sciences (e.g. international relations) however, cannot and will never attain the level of complete science strict-sensu; particularly because it is value-laden.

Differences between social sciences and natural sciences

This also brings into limelight the differences between social sciences and physical or natural sciences. In natural sciences, definition of terms/concepts more or less is the same that is to say, more generalised because of its regularity, tests, objectivity and set of procedure. For example, an 'isotope' of a chemical element is generally define as 'a species of atoms with the same atomic number and the same position in the periodic table and nearly identical chemical behaviour, but with differing atomic mass'.¹⁵ Also under laboratory experimentation, the chemical property, 'chlorine' enjoys equal universal acceptability, just as in mathematical calculations, universally one plus one is equal to two ($1 + 1 = 2$).¹⁶ While the social sciences see objectivity as a phenomenon resting on subjectivity, since concepts are perceived differently, this includes value consideration.¹⁷ Political studies for instance cannot attain the same level or status as pure science, such as industrial chemistry or applied physics because it involves too many variables, and whose suppositions, in the words of an influential political scholar, Appadorai are unclear, uncertain, with dubious and questionable conclusions.¹⁸

Political studies, like other social sciences, but unlike pure sciences are normative in character and therefore make normative prepositions, and normative prepositions state value judgments. As Fay in consideration of

experience in the context of social sciences, made us to understand, 'experiences are in part constituted by what might be called the interpretive assumptions a person brings to a particular situation, that is, they are shaped by the expectations, memories, beliefs, desires, and cultural prejudices which go to make them up'.¹⁹ This statement about experience, which arguably influences all social science scholars in their writings suggest the crucial nature of value issues. More so, due to the characteristic nature of human element in political studies and the fact that human-being is prone to adopting a superiority pose over others, it is therefore difficult to get a disinterested or an undiluted observation, as most observations in the social sciences are at the risk of confusing facts with value issues, such as moral judgement and bias.²⁰

Value-free and value-laden political studies, some general characteristics

Generally, but succinctly, on one hand, Value-free political studies may therefore be characterised in terms of the beliefs, which include: Politics is independent, in the sense that moral values are not (wholly) applicable or pertinent in political life; facts and values are reasonably separate, and the gap is far from being closed by rationality; values are irrational (and likely subjective) since their validity is not disposed or subject to scientific proof; and various values rest in incompatible conflict.²¹ On the other hand, there is no value-free political study because of the following factors: Politics is a conscious human activity, and so an activity subject to human choice, thus open to assessment or evaluation in respect to moral values of all human life; politics involves policies and policies in the same ball game involve values; since aspects of political studies involves value, they must be influenced by values; political values are embodied in political institutions and practices, and therefore provide a justification for political change; the selection of political phenomena for study by political science, like the basic choice of science over non-science, requires human value-judgment.²²

Conclusion

Based on the above submissions, in conclusion therefore, this paper agrees and maintains that a value-free approach in political science or political study with value-freedom, is not possible, though, what is necessary is that a researcher should attempt and try, in fact can separate his bias from analysis.²³ This imports that value-free approach in political studies is not possible nor desirable, those that solicit for a political study

that will be free of value, is simply engaging in a mere intellectual exercise, and in an arid and fruitless one in that matter. This conclusion should not be a cause for alarm, as some expectedly might fear that this will cause political study to be unscientific or unphilosophical. But, this is not so because the study of politics will not lose its scientific or philosophical character because it is value laden or normative, though political study cannot attain the empirical or scientific level or statue of natural or pure science.

End Notes:

¹ Bernard Barber, *The Politics of Political Science: "Value-Free" Theory and the Wolin-Strauss Dust-Up of 1963*: 2006 American Political Science Review, Vol, 100, No. 4, pp. 539-545.

² David Morrice, Philosophy, Science and Ideology in Political Thought. (Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), chapter 6.

³ Opcit, Bernard Barber, P.539.

⁴ Opcit, Morrice David, chapter 6.

⁵ Dennis Kavanagh, Political Science and Political Behaviour. (George Allan and Unwin: Sydney, 1983), p.191.

⁶ Keith Webb, An Introduction to Problems in the Philosophy of Social Sciences. (Wellington House: London, 1995), p.73.

⁷ Ibid P.70.

⁸ Allan Issak, Scope and Methods of Political Science: An Introduction to the Methodology of Political Inquiry. (Irwin-Dorsey Press: Ontario, 1981), p.7.

⁹ David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, eds., Theory and Methods in Political Science. (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2002), p.186.

¹⁰ Cahn Edmond. The Sense of Injustice. (New York University Press: New York, 1949).

¹¹ Hans Kelson, General Theory of Law and the State. (Russell: New York, 1961).

¹² Opcit, Dennis Kavanagh, P.191.

¹³ Opcit, Allan Issak, P.60.

¹⁴ Chelu Dana, 'What is the Future of IR Theory? Does it need a Radical Review?' Journal of Politics and Law Vol. 1 No 2 June 2008 pp. 64-67.

¹⁵ John Hospers, An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis. 4th Ed, (Routledge: London, 1997). P.12.

¹⁶ Okechukwu Oji, An Introduction to Political Science. (MaryDan Publishers: Enugu, 1997), p.9.

¹⁷ Rob Walker, Modules Summary Guide the Philosophy of the Social Sciences; in MRes Research Training Hand Book. (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Keele University Keele England, 2006), p.15.

¹⁸ Angadipuram Appaduria, The Substance of Politics. (Oxford University Press: London, 1968).

¹⁹ Brian Fay, Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science. (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 1996), p.13.

²⁰ Opcit, Okechukwu Oji, P.9.

²¹ Opcit, David Morrice.

²² Ibid, David Morrice; Opcit, Allan Issak.

²³ Gina Wisker, The Postgraduate Research Handbook. (Palgrave: New York, 2001), p.164.