

## Discussing The Politics of Political Science: Re-Writing Latin American Experiences

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(RAVECCA, Paulo. *The Politics of Political Science: Re-Writing Latin American Experiences*. New York and London: Routledge, 2019)

A review is an interpretation and, at the same time, an invitation to read. Paulo Ravecca's book is challenging, dynamic, and thought-provoking, sparking questions and reflections within many areas of research and politics. This makes it a book with unlimited potential to stimulate and nourish research in a diverse array of matters beyond those specifically approached by it. It engages the reader – front and centre – with a stark political message: anyone can be oppressive, and oppression can happen in the name of anything. The author interrogates 'us', the readers, as he explores the link between knowledge and power.

The work combines critical theory, epistemology, and comparative politics. This unusual blend implies in itself a contribution to questions about the type of knowledge we produce, and how we teach it. It makes us query and reflect on why we teach social sciences – specifically, political science. This book is unique in its capacity to spotlight, and interrogate, the political dimension of academic practice, disentangling ever present power relations.

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The book's first chapter is an intellectual exercise of critique that targets positivism and the illusion of scholarly neutrality. Drawing from the Marxist tradition and post-structuralist, postcolonial, and queer studies, the piece argues that knowledge is a battlefield. The author keeps a critical distance and tension vis-à-vis his own theoretical tools. This critique of positivism that, at the same time, refuses to idealize its own gaze embraces a scholarly praxis of resistance against potential temptations to simplify the complex (and sometimes contradictory) landscape of knowledge and power. Ravecca (2019) thus interrogates the persistent lack of problematization of the link between reflection and emancipation.

The critical unpacking of positivism, scientific objectivity and its implications is developed through a wide array of methodological approaches and is empirically grounded on the recent political and academic developments in Chile and Uruguay, though the book constantly keeps a more hemispheric and multiscale perspective. Ravecca (2019) structures the book as a journey through different epistemological 'temperatures' (cold, warm, and hot) that translate "intensity levels in the engagement with the interplay between subject (i.e. subjectivity), knowledge, and power" (RAVECCA, 2019, p. 211). In other words, they refer to the distance, or lack thereof, between knowing subject and known object.

The chapter on Chile is 'cold'. The way in which the methods and techniques are mobilized expresses this epistemological temperature (for example, the different role that interviews play in this and the following chapter is revealing). The relationship between authoritarianism and political science is at the centre of this analysis. I, however, found the way the relationship between authoritarianism and neoliberalism is explored particularly interesting. It makes visible the role of the Pinochet-era Chilean political science in this relationship. The chapter is organized around the quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis of all the articles published by two leading political science journals in Chile: *Revista de Ciencia Política* (1979-2012) and *Política* (1982-2012). This examination is paired with 35 interviews and further document analysis. Ravecca (2019) builds evidence that links analysis and theoretical reflection, showing the main components of a political science moulded by – and a contributor to – the project of 'Pinochetismo'. The chapter introduces a conceptual construct of invaluable interpretative power:

‘authoritarian political science’. This concept stands as a main contribution of the book which invites us to reconsider these processes not only through their ‘historical nature’ – considering the context of Latin American dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – but also in terms of our present-day reality, with democracy finding itself in trouble – or weakened – in some parts of the continent.

The conceptualisation of ‘authoritarian political science’ is of key importance given that it shows how an institutional discourse can be built to justify governments and projects that damage democracy and give way to authoritarianism, sometimes even in the name of democracy itself. The concept elucidates how economic neoliberalism was ‘and is’ justified as the pathway to ‘the most important freedom’ (the freedom of markets), and how – as Wendy Brown (2006) has warned – the different rationales of neoliberalism and neoconservatism sometimes merge and incorporate essentialist views of western and Christian supremacy, such as those informing the current cultural backlash (NORRIS and INGLEHART, 2019). In this way, Ravecca (2019) manages to provide elements and tools that help us study new conservative movements emerging after the crisis of globalization – kickstarted in 2008 – which defy the international order and its values (SANAHOJA, 2019). In Latin America these movements – like Jair Bolsonaro’s in Brazil – have managed to achieve significant power.

On the other hand, the chapter on Uruguay and its political science approximate a warmer epistemological temperature, illustrating the leading role that the subjectivity of members of the academic community plays in the analysis (through the interviews). In both the Chilean and Uruguayan cases, Ravecca (2019) critically analyses political science processes from multiple approaches. In the Uruguayan case, he shows how the discipline was institutionalised after the civic-military dictatorship (1973-1985), during the return to democracy. Uruguay thus did not host its own version of ‘authoritarian political science’ but rather developed a space in which, according to Ravecca (2019), academics became complacent vis-à-vis the vernacular liberal democracy and specifically its political parties and elites. This complacency, Ravecca (2019) argues, manifests itself as a lack of critical analysis. He argues that this uncritical collective disposition is functional to official narratives and dominant political practices

because it consolidates an academic, theoretical and epistemological language that delineates, reproduces and sustains established power relations. Thus, whereas Uruguay did not have an 'authoritarian political science', it did have one that avoided discussions on key subject matters – for instance, issues of transitional justice – that remain unresolved.

Given that Ravecca's critical theory (2019) approach situates its analysis in the context of a historical time, the discipline of History might offer tools for critical engagement. Revisiting this analysis through a historical lens may allow for deepening the interpretation, particularly in order to problematize how, at times, analytical frames travel from the author's present to that of the players of the stories being narrated. Additionally, in some instances, the historical analysis could go further back in time to expand the understanding of its object of study.

The Annales school – particularly Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre – has reflected on this murky relationship between past and present. Mobilizing contemporary values and categories for the analysis of the past can lead to difficulties in interpretation. The means are, to a certain extent, judged in hindsight by the results obtained. Even though Ravecca (2019) traces clear connections between the historical events described and his 22 interviewees, placing subjectivity at the centre of the analysis, I believe that the Uruguayan case could be approached by examining specific situations in the process of construction of the country's political science during the return to democracy, when key players lived the process day to day with all the uncertainties that implies. This does not mean normatively justifying Uruguayan political science, but rather rethinking it and expanding the realm of interpretation.

An alternative approach could point to the fact that the reconstructed processes, since they are close to the present in historical time, belong to the contemporaneity of the interviewees. In that case, we would enter a debate regarding the relationship between history and memory because, although contextualised, these analysed 'memories' contain the dialectics of remembering and forgetting (NORA, 1984). Even though interviews are a tool used by Ravecca (2019) to capture this 'contemporaneity' and he develops other strategies to analytically place himself in the past (for instance by analysing the historical context, significant events, and all articles published by the *Revista Uruguaya de Ciencia*

*Política* between 1987 and 2012) he is ‘also’ working within this dialectic of remembering and forgetting that memory itself implies. Beyond this caveat, the chapter does manage to shed light on the overlap of the personal, political, and academic, moving forward through the ‘epistemological thermostat’ that the book offers.

The complacent mindset that Ravecca (2019) ascribes to Uruguayan political science can be traced back to its origins. He does not aim to do this because his focus is on how such complacency operates within a specific context. However, the characteristics identified by Ravecca (2019) could have more to do with a pre-dictatorial past rather than a post-dictatorship one. The discourse praising parties and consociational politics did not in itself originate within political science, but rather in History. The historian Juan Pivel Devoto had structured this narrative previously, in his two-volume ‘History of Political Parties in Uruguay’ (1942)<sup>1</sup>. This work highlighted the key role of parties in the construction of the country’s history. Ravecca (2019) does not trace the path of this complacent narrative from History to Political Science to advance his critique. Pivel Devoto is a key figure that any study should account for when thinking about the Uruguayan ‘national story’. Studying the origins of this narrative within History would also help us better understand Uruguayan Political Science and its origins.

Even though the chapters on Chile and Uruguay develop different approaches and styles, they remain tightly coherent by constantly questioning the – multidirectional – relationship between subjectivity, knowledge, ideology, and politics. Despite this, one could argue that there is a further need to retake what Fernand Braudel (2002) would call ‘longue durée’ (the long term). Both cases draw on a relationship with liberalism that could, from a historical perspective, help understand the contrasts identified by Ravecca (2019). While Chilean liberalism had an intense conversation with Auguste Comte’s positivism, with its authoritarian and elitist overtones (JAKSIC, 2001), Uruguayan liberalism was more engaged with the positivism of Herbert Spencer (ARDAO, 1962, 1950). These specificities could help bring new questions about the cases under analysis.

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<sup>1</sup>*Historia de los Partidos Políticos en el Uruguay.*

The fourth chapter raises the epistemological temperature and, consequently, is where the separation between subject and object of study is most intensively challenged. It develops – what I would call – an ‘auto-ethno-biography’. The analysis confronts, and makes visible, forms of violence, relations of knowledge and power, technologies of control and their relationship with heteronormativity. The author’s personal memory and the collective memory of his environment become actively intertwined within a narrative that encompasses, and makes sense of, experiences of abuse and violence as a way of exploring the following idea: anyone can be oppressive, and oppression can be performed in the name of anything (be it communism or liberal democracy). The reader does not go through the chapter, but rather it is the chapter that ‘goes through’ the reader. In this way, the text shakes the reader, stimulating and expanding critical thought.

It must be pointed out that the ‘auto-ethno-biographic’ narrative engages with the issues and themes previously raised in the book. It gives them new meaning, enriching the reader’s interpretation and inviting her to re-think each topic. A more critical look at this chapter could point out that the analysis presented could be expanded by including other voices, other life stories captured through different methods and research tools. This would, however, imply taking a different path to the one chosen by Ravecca (2019).

To conclude, Ravecca (2019) invites us to revisit the main reflections and findings of his intellectual tour de force, drawing theoretical dialogues, questioning the discipline and informing such reflections through the systematic comparison of the cases examined. Finally, the possibility of a different narrative within the discipline emerges from the search for freedom through self-reflection. Perhaps, the best description of this text has already been captured by Leo Masliah, in a song that Ravecca quotes in a different passage when speaking of writers and their words: “They do not want laurels or glory (...) They only pass onto paper (...) experiences, totally personal, zonal, (...) partial elements that when gathered are not such”<sup>2</sup> (Biromes y Servilletas, 1994).

Revised by Eoin Portella

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<sup>2</sup>“No pretenden glorias ni laureles, (...) solo pasan a papeles (...), experiencias totalmente personales, zonales, (...) elementos muy parciales que juntados no son tales” (Author’s translation).

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