

# The Relevance of Political Science in the Philippines Today

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A few months ago, when I returned to the University after a long "vacation", a colleague asked me: "What is happening to Political Science today? It is dying as a discipline or is it dead?" I was, of course, puzzled by the question. Since I was out of circulation for a few years, I did not know the situation. But my answer was brief: "If it is dead, then let us bury it; if it is dying, let us examine what ails it—perhaps it can still be saved."

I recalled this incident when I was asked to talk about "The Relevance of Political Science in the Philippines Today." But I am here this afternoon, not to deliver the eulogy in its burial; instead, I have come here to share a few thoughts and observations on what possibly ails it. Perhaps if we know the cause, we might be able to do something about the ailment so that Political Science as a discipline will not have an untimely demise and so that it can become relevant once more to our national life. What can make Political Science irrelevant is not the discipline itself, for Political Science, by itself, is always relevant.

The study of the principles, value systems and beliefs which seek to explain or justify different political systems, for instance, is important and, therefore, relevant; similarly, it is very important to know and analyze what is happening in government, in the bureaucracy, and in our relations with other countries; who governs, how do they govern, and for whose interest do they govern; what kind of

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laws are made; what are the forces at work in government and politics—all these are relevant for they affect all of us, not only you and I who are members of the Philippine Political Science Association, but also all the people in this country, whether they live in the rich enclaves of Makati or in the urban shanties of Tondo or the nipa shacks of rural Philippines.

There is no question, therefore, that Political Theory, Government and Politics, Public Administration, International Relations, Political Dynamics, Public Law and Legislation, etc., are all important and relevant fields to explore and investigate, whether we do so as teachers, students, researchers or even as general practitioners.

Why then this question of relevance or irrelevance? Perhaps we can answer this question better if we first look into the condition or the state of Political Science in the Philippines today.

I have earlier indicated that I was out of circulation for a while and I have not taught during the last three years. But I assure you that my interest in our discipline has never waned. On the contrary, my experience made me more convinced that we, political scientists, should pay closer attention to the phenomenon of *power* for it is truly the *core* of the study of politics.

The observations I want to share with you are impressions gathered from talks with colleagues in the discipline, with students of politics, and relevant readings.

First is the observation that there seems to be a widespread *reluctance* among Filipino social scientists in general, and political scientists in particular, to go into a serious study of the more meaningful problems and issues confronting our society today. There is the tendency to shy away from the primary obligation of scholars and social scientists to pursue the truth wherever it leads us, and we are now withdrawing, it appears, into the sanctuary of the "safer" and less sensitive areas of inquiry. If this observation is correct, then it is a serious or even a fatal setback for the discipline since it would mean that many of us would soon lose that social sensitivity to matters which affect society and instead be reduced to teaching and studying trivialities. It would mean an abdication of our social responsibility as social scientists and as students of society.

There are compelling reasons, of course, why this tendency is occurring. Professor Dubsy, in an article which appeared in the special maiden issue of the *Philippine Political Science Journal* entitled "The Place of Political Science in the Philippine New Society," discussed the reasons. He argued that under conditions of

Martial Law, there are bound to be limits to political inquiry and that in performing the necessary function of "social criticism", "the student of politics may be permitted to indulge only in "constructive" criticism or in "constructive" theoretical activities, that is, those activities that reflect the prevailing (and officially advocated) ideological position. Free political inquiry, therefore, may not be tolerated and inevitably, what we would call political life—the trivialities I mentioned earlier—and would not give expression to the reflections, aspirations, values, and ideals of the people as seen from another perspective.

Our political scientists today, I think, are not deliberately indifferent to the important problems and issues facing society. It may be that having accustomed themselves, by training and temperament, to look at all aspects of a problem, they may find it difficult to have access to the information, data, or sources they need which may help them see the problem from a different perspective. And finally, of course, if they come out with the finished product of their scientific inquiry, they may not feel free to report the findings of their research—in published form, or to share it in the classrooms through the medium of teaching—without having to worry about their safety, career, future professional opportunities, etc., especially if the answers of tentative conclusions they made are not acceptable to their superiors or the establishment. These, I think, are the more plausible explanations to the withdrawal into the "safer" and less sensitive areas of inquiry by our political scientists, rather than the harsher verdict of intellectual abdication of a social responsibility.

A second observation, and I think, a consequence of the first, is that our teachers and students of Political Science are more and more being driven into the vocational and "practical" aspect of the discipline. "If there are such risks, why don't I just think of political science as a preparation for a career, say in law, politics, foreign service, public administration, etc.?", a practical-minded student would probably ask. It should be noted that even before, there was already a pattern towards this attitude Political science, as a matter of fact, has already taken the place of the abolished two-year preparatory course in Law. This, I think, is the explanation as to why in the faculty recruitment of many of our colleges and universities in the Philippines, lawyers have been preferred to teach political science courses. This has also produced a second negative effect: the teaching of political science because too formalistic and "legalistic", sometimes being reduced to a memorization of constitutional provi-

sions, number of legislations, (if any) terms of office, salaries, constitutional division of powers of government and checks and balances between the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary (when these existed) and such other details of constitutional and institutional arrangements.

In a survey conducted on students of political science in seven universities for a master's thesis (by Elmer Vigilia, "Teaching of Political Science in the Philippines" in PPSJ, June 1974), it was shown that more than 83% of the political science students were more interested in the "practical" aspects of the discipline, that is, as a preparation for a law degree (52.25%) and as training for would-be politicians (31.4%). Only 16.35% were interested in the discipline as such. The figures in the Department of Political Science in UP would not differ very much from these. I was informed that perhaps 65 to 80% of our undergraduate political science students will probably proceed to a law course after graduation.

As if in desperation, some of colleagues in the discipline are also beginning to adopt the "practical" view, namely: provided the students with "skills that would add to their employability" (Vigilia, PPSJ, p. 73).

As a matter of fact another colleague even went further. Worried about the decreasing job opportunities open to graduates of Political Science, our colleague here (Dr. Wilfrido V. Villacorta) has come out with a proposal to replace the Political Science program in universities and colleges with a "career-oriented Public Service Program" complete with a proposed curriculum.

All these developments are, in my opinion, lamentable for, instead of enlarging the domain of political science to the vast area of "education for intelligent citizenship", we are now contributing to hastening the transformation of the discipline into one of the skill-oriented vocational courses.

In spite of all this, however, there is still some "intellectual" activity going on. At least once a year, a Political Science Journal comes out, and a conference of Political Scientists takes place which tend to show that while the fire may be out, there are still embers glowing in the dark. The intellectual community of Political Scientists, though small in number, still gather yearly and discuss significant problems and issues of our times. This year's conference theme, particularly, has focused on Power and Social Responsibility. One wished, however, that the theme should have been more adequately covered in the assigned sections and papers for it is indeed a

very important one, especially during these times.

A sweeping review of the activities of the Association and the topics given attention during annual conferences and in its journal would indicate the following:

(1) There are still very few participants in the intellectual exchanges and some of these few, probably, assume some risks for airing their thoughts, views and convictions. The "thoughts" emerging are influenced by Greek Political Thought (Plato, Aristotle), Anglo-American Liberalism (Locke, Jefferson, J. Stuart Mills, Rousseau, Adam Smith, etc.), and recently, some Socialist Thought (marxism).

An interesting development is the "new" ideological thrust which should be "Filipino". But one sees glimpses and influences of Plato's *Republic* and "philosopher-king", Aristotle's *Politics*, and Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* and their latter-day disciples.

While these discussions have been too few and far between, it is hoped that the PPSA would initiate more of them and on topics of current problems and interests, for after all this is one way by which we can make our discipline relevant. Political Science, to be truly relevant, must never be detached from its environment and from reality. Political scientists must continue to address themselves to the problems and issues of our times. It must escape from becoming an "ivory-tower" discipline and must search for goals which must coincide or, at least, run parallel to socially desirable goals. These goals, of course, must not be determined by one man, or a small group of men but must be subjected to a continuing examination and scrutiny of people—the masses of our people. And they must be measured by the gauge of performance. *Goals* like national development, nationbuilding, social justice, democracy, etc. must be operationally defined and thoroughly discussed by the people—not by the elite few—to attain a genuine popular consensus on their "social desirability". If "development" and "modernization" in the Third World, for example, have always been for a few in a class society, why should the lower class be expected to support these? From their experience, everytime "development experts" come around to make development surveys, it means that they will probably be displaced or relocated, or their lands expropriated, and their forest wealth and mineral resources taken. After the "development process" takes place, it will be announced that the GNP has increased, the economic pie has become bigger—but it is the foreigner and his partner belonging to the local oligarchy who become wealthy

while the poor remain as they are and minus the natural wealth over which he had a rightful share.

To be relevant, should Political Science be a committed science? To my mind, whether we like it or not, a Department of Political Science would tend to reflect the social reality outside it. That is, of course, if there is not deliberate attempt to produce an artificial situation. Thus, in our present situation now, we may find political scientists espousing ideas of the New Society. We also meet professors espousing free-enterprise liberalism, which is still the dominant bourgeoisie ideology. But because our social reality is such that majority of our people—the masses—are still in their present economically depressed and exploited condition, should one be surprised if there are some intellectuals who may articulate the aspirations of the voiceless masses?

We must, therefore, abandon the old liberal notion of "neutral" and disinterested political science. After all, it has never existed except as an illusion.

Political science, to be relevant, must perform the function of social criticism. No less than President Marcos admitted this as an essential function of an intellectual community. In a speech he made on the occasion of the oath-taking of UP President Corpuz, he said that in order to maintain the intellectual integrity of the University, the transforming criticism of society emanating from it must be allowed. If this were so, why then should political scientists shirk from this important social responsibility?

In conclusion, let me repeat what I said earlier: To save Political Science from extinction as a discipline and to make it truly relevant.

(1) We must not shy away from our primary obligation as scholars and social scientists to pursue the truth wherever it leads us, and must not withdraw into the "safer" and less sensitive areas of inquiries;

(2) We must not lose that social sensitivity to matters which affect society at large;

(3) We must overcome our timidity so we can delve into the meaningful problems and issues that are important not only to the discipline of Political Science but also to our people; and

(4) We must not be afraid that we might come up with solutions and answers to the questions raised which may not be acceptable by our superiors or by the Establishment and, therefore, may prejudice our careers, promotion, or future professional opportunity.

Perhaps these are too demanding for some of us. For it could

very well be that the unique conditions we are experiencing today and the peculiar times we live in have somehow contributed immensely in producing these types of response of *lack* of response, among both teachers and students of political science.

But we cannot forever blame "conditions" and the "times" to explain our behavior. Precisely, people are supposed to be superior to lower forms of animals because they are not captives of their environment, because they can reason, and because they can create. Unlike the lower forms of living things which depend on nature for their food and other needs, people can grow their own food and can satisfy their other needs through the use of their ability to create. People, in fact, are able to harness even nature, to defy the law of gravity and travel to the moon, to build huge dams and control mighty rivers, and to split the atom. People can change or modify the environment, whether natural or social, to suit their needs. In short, they can create the conditions under which they want to live. And people can, and do, make their own history.

To argue, therefore, that the prevailing conditions and the difficult times prevent us from discharging our obligations and social responsibilities as political scientist does not seem to be a valid argument. For, if it were, then Political Science will become moribund and pretty soon, it will probably stagnate and die as a discipline.