


BOOK REVIEW

The Fate of Political Scientists in Europe: From Myth to Action

By **Giliberto Capano and Luca Verzichelli**, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 178 pp. Online version: open access. Softcover Book € 34,42. Hardcover Book € 43,52

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Political science is one of the youngest social disciplines. Although its ‘external borders’ and the moment of its birth have been subject to debate and different visions, it was first born in Europe and later expanded in the 1950s, to strengthen democracy and provide useful knowledge during the development of the Welfare State. After this first stage of growth, the field had a new impulse with the fall of the socialist bloc and the regional integration at the end of the 20th century.

With this book, professors Giliberto Capano (author of several handbooks of political science) and Luca Verzichelli (current president of the Società Italiana di Scienza Politica) study the forms of institutionalization, professionalization, and Europeanization of the field on the continent. Moreover, these dimensions have influenced the disciplinary identity and the vision of the role to be played by scholars in this branch of knowledge. After the post-war ‘thirty glorious years’, the discipline has undergone reformulations and shocks that have changed its objects of study and research agendas. These events were mainly the economic stagnation that hit the Welfare State in the 1970s and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We can also add the economic collapse of 2008, the refugee crisis of 2015, the Euroscepticism that led to Brexit, and the episodes of this decade, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine.

The book makes an imaginative and profound reflection on the professional practice of European political scientists with a critical and perspicacious view, without leaving aside methodological rigor. The work presents the results of a survey administered to more than 11,000 scholars and 20 qualitative interviews with professionals on the region. Its four sections reflect on the history, current state, and challenges facing the discipline in light of the turbulent times the countries of the region are going through.

The first chapter focuses on the historical background and a critical balance of the field in Europe. Although there is a predominant absence of a common core, resulting in fragmentation and heterogeneity, we find a preponderance of quantitative methodologies and sophisticated research designs, linked to publication in American journals. However, the authors argue, there is a lack of societal relevance, which leaves the discipline outside the social sphere and the political debate. This position distances the discipline from its original approach, connected to a rigorous science deeply committed to democracy and the social problems of its time.

Professionalization has followed different paths in Western and Eastern Europe. In the West, it developed from the second post-war period, but in the East, it had to wait for the collapse of the Soviet bloc for political science to emerge. The indicators used to measure this development are the birth of chairs (with the pioneering case of Sweden in 1622), mostly during the 20th century, and the creation of professional associations. One of the characteristics emphasized by the authors is the presence of a pluralist imprint in the United States, while in Europe there was a

more elitist vision of political phenomena. In addition, Constitutional Law has been important, and we find a strong tradition of sociology—particularly in France—, which conditioned the development of political science. On the other hand, Capano and Verzichelli mention that there is an early specialization in several subfields, which weakened the disciplinary profile, generating a ‘second disciplinary identity’ that interacts with professionals from other sciences.

The next chapter focuses on the trajectories of political science in Europe that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, focusing on three lines of analysis: professionalization, institutionalization, and Europeanization. The growth of the field is marked by stages that translate into generations of political scientists, where we find the founders or ‘*emeriti*’, followed by the *Seniors* -Ph.D.s with institutional positions and robust editorial activity at the national and European level. Finally, the new category they create is ‘*Young Lions*’, to refer to researchers who have put themselves at the forefront with high publication performance and novel teaching and research techniques.

After analyzing the density of existing programs in European countries, and looking comparatively at intra-regional developments, the chapter outlines a typology of political scientists according to their predisposition to achieve collective goals in the discipline, or their intention to impact the public sphere. Here we find different ‘myths’: the *Aeneas* are dedicated to common achievements in the field by subordinating their agenda to the relevant problems of the moment; the *Sisyphus* are disenchanted by the effort in political science that has led to nothing; the *Odysseus* are concerned with human resource training and institution building; and finally, the *Achilles* have a strong concern for influencing the public debate.

The third chapter shows the challenges and new scenarios facing European political science, especially since the last decade. The central hypothesis presented by the authors is the emergence of new ‘external’ and ‘internal’ frontiers. Although political scientists are dispersed, they focus on three main areas (comparative politics, international relations, and public administration/public policy). Although we are witnessing methodological complexity and new attitudes among academics, the section concludes that the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic has not generated such notable changes, leaving the discipline behind other social sciences in the production of knowledge.

The closing chapter takes up the central concern about the challenges and relevance of political science in Europe in the post-pandemic. Here, Capano and Verzichelli criticize what they call the ‘methodification’ which pretends to give neutrality to political analysis. Recovering Harold Lasswell’s original worry, the authors mention that ‘political science needs to improve its theoretical and analytical capacities to produce knowledge capable of helping society in turbulent times, when crises are recurrent and uncertainty is structurally high’ (p. 140).

The bitterness of the risks of political science’s oblivion contrasts with the hope for the possibility of relaunching it shortly. The education of new political scientists is a key point that the Italian professors highlight as a great opportunity to achieve a promising future for the discipline. Thus, they propose to instruct the new generations of professionals in theoretical eclecticism, and with training activities with an emphasis on major social problems, rather than intellectual issues. The search for impact in the public debate must be combined with a commitment to the pedagogy of next generations of political scientists. This is the key to moving from ‘myths’ to action.

The final reflections of this book go beyond the classic disciplinary studies that always highlight the ‘shortcomings’ of the field at a given time and place. It offers hopes and thoughts to give new impulses to European political science. We should not fail to consider that the volume has been written by Italian colleagues, in a land where political thought (and later political science) has molded ideas and rigorous knowledge about political phenomena from the particular problems that the peninsula has gone through throughout its history. The germ that flourished in Machiavelli’s Florence must give new shoots in the new generations of political scientists in turbulent times.