Peter Rožič

THE ILLIBERAL FOUNDING OF MODERN POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY
STUDY OF POLITICS

SUMMARY: What philosopher should be conferred the prestigious title of the founder of modern political science? This article claims that Thomas Hobbes most deserves to be called the founding father of the modern scientific discipline tasked with the study of politics, state and government. Disapproving of its ancient founder, Aristotle, the discipline begins anew with a combination of arguments from Machiavelli and Hobbes. More precisely, modern political science is founded on the Hobbesian correction of Machiavelli as Hobbes not only focuses on the separation of morals and science, by relying on an illiberal conception of human nature, but also radically redefines science as such. This paradigmatic shift has in turn subverted the discipline. The legacies of Hobbesian scientific revolution have provided contemporary political science with a justification for its fascination with order and metrics. Denying the intrinsic value of the normative nature of political realities, a coherent conception of politics and, consequently, a coherent conception of the purpose of the study of politics remain incomplete and illiberal.

KEY WORDS: Founder, Political Science, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Modern, Illiberal.

The works of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Hobbes represent monumental and key philosophical contributions to the foundations of modern political science. Contemporary political philosophers confer to the three the prestigious title of a founding father of this discipline. Hans Morgenthau writes that Aristotle is both the father of political science for having made it an independent discipline, and a modern thinker due to his influence upon Western political thought.¹ Leo Strauss argues that the founder of modern political thought is Machiavelli for his mastery of blasphemy

and the debasement of the moral standards of political action.² Peter Berkowitz claims that the founder is Hobbes since he introduces a new and rigid method of inquiry of morality and politics.³ Who therefore most deserves the title of the founder of modern political science? What are the criteria on which the makings of the founder can be discerned? Finally, what implications do the founder’s theories have on the contemporary scientific discipline tasked with the study of politics, state and government?

There is no doubt that Thomas Hobbes founded modern political science. While political science dates back to Antiquity, the modern version of the same discipline disapproves of its ancient founder, Aristotle, and begins anew with a combination of arguments of Machiavelli and Hobbes. More precisely, modern political science is founded on the Hobbesian correction of Machiavelli as Hobbes not only focuses on the separation of morals and science, by relying on a profoundly illiberal conception of human nature, but also radically redefines science as such. This paradigmatic shift has in turn subverted the discipline. The legacies of Hobbesian scientific revolution have provided contemporary political science with a justification for its obsessive fascination with order, metrics and statistics. In order to defend this argument, this article articulates the main criteria for what counts as political science, modern, illiberal and founder. The article first addresses the scope of this old discipline. It then examines how modern political philosophers reoriented the discipline through their new understanding of human nature, political community and science. The article concludes by discussing the implications of founding the discipline on Hobbesian premises. It claims that by denying the intrinsic value of the normative nature of political phenomena, a coherent conception of politics and, consequently, a coherent conception of the purpose of the study of politics remain incomplete and illiberal.

The Ancient Scope of the Discipline

The problem addressed in political science in general, and political philosophy in particular, is ancient.⁴ This problem dates back to, and subsists in, the first

4 The uneasy relationship between political science and political philosophy, as evident in academic circles and university departments, is crucial to the argument of this essay. Political science is philosophical by nature. It examines fundamental problems and concepts in a critical manner through a rational argument. Through the lens of political philosophy, political science
investigations of the nature, causes and effects of good government. In ancient Greece, Sophocles and Thucydides address the nature of the government-related phenomena such as state control, natural law, civil disobedience, citizenship and violence. Plato and Aristotle go further in shaping the foundations of political science. Besides studying specific political phenomena, both Plato and Aristotle address the concerns about the appropriate methodology for the study of these phenomena. However, only Aristotle develops the criteria on how to conduct science as such.

The founder of political science is Aristotle as he is the first political philosopher to thoroughly define the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of science. Aristotle distinguishes sciences according to their ends and understands politics as practical rather than contemplative or productive science. Political science is practical, for it deals with the virtues and happiness of the citizenry, i.e., it deals with good action. More precisely, in order to explain the political life of a polis, Aristotelian political science uses the methodology of four causes. While focusing on the material cause of the city-state (citizenry, resources), on its formal cause (the constitution), and on its efficient cause (lawgivers), Aristotle particularly emphasizes the polis’s final cause. This latter cause is a high moral aim of bringing about the good life. The final cause of the polis leads Aristotle to task political science with the examination of both the ideal and practicable questions within a normative framework. For example, one of the theoretical tasks of this “branch of knowledge” is to consider which constitution comes closest to the ideal. The normative component of this theory-based scientific conduct naturally lends itself to prescriptive considerations such as what political systems are better in theory and

analyzes concepts such as politics, authority, law and justice. Yet, unlike in antiquity, contemporary political philosophy does not represent the whole of the discipline but rather its sub-filed. Other sub-fields of the discipline such as international relations or comparative political science often omit the normative aspect of inquiry, which usually represents a constitutive part of political philosophy, and emphasizes the positivist approach to science. As a consequence, there has been much debate about the role and need of political philosophy in the departments of political science. Some have spuriously claimed that philosophy is not sufficiently scientific. Others have advocated for a fruitful interaction between political philosophy and other branches of political science. Still others, such as those of the so-called “perestroika movement,” have argued strongly against the perceived hegemony of positivist and quantitative approaches to political science. See Laitin, David D., “The Perestroikan Challenge to Social Science”, Politics & Society, 31, no. 1, 2003, 163-184 and Monroe, Kristen R. ed., Perestroika!: The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

5 Aristotelian political science, therefore, combines political philosophy and moral philosophy.
7 Cf. Aristotle, Politics, IV.
therefore ought to be chosen. Yet, critical of Plato, Aristotelian political science is not limited to an ideal system. Political science also investigates practical questions. For example, which is the most practicable, that is, the second-best constitution, the one that is best suited to a particular polis? Like the theory-based questions of political ideals, the question of practicality lends itself to similar normative considerations than. Practicality, according to Aristotle, examines those normatively postulated elements that provide legitimacy and stability to a political system on the basis of the existing circumstances.

**Modernity’s Redefinition of the Common Good**

While the double problem (or definition) of political science—namely the investigation of the theory and practice of politics as well as the study on how to best conduct such an investigation—is ancient, modernity radically redefines the scope and the methodology of this science.

The main traits of modernity that correspond to the beginnings of modern political science can be summarized into two processes: the process of individuation and the process of scientific objectification. Process of individuation relates to the emergence of the individual as an irreplaceable and distinctive person. While before modernity, as in many traditional societies, identity was determined more by social position than by notions of individuality, modern person has an identity of her own. Modernity encourages individual members of the society to be free of external authority, such as nature or tradition. The individual is expected to act authentically, to choose who she is and what she wants to be.

While Aristotle claims that the community is prior to the individual, modernity takes a direction toward the autonomy of the self. According to the Moderns, individuals no longer act based on a transcendent authority such as God and community but on self-interest. Free from the dictates of external authority, it is the rational human being herself that sets moral precepts. What is more, modern


thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes recognize human nature as inept for good action and thus reinvent moral postulates of human action. For example, diametrically opposed to Aristotle, Hobbes derives moral and political conclusions based upon a specific understanding of human nature, which makes self-interest the central part of human motivation. This new morality allows rational agents to best fulfill their interests in a world of natural equality, scarce resources, and conflicting ends.\textsuperscript{13} In short, according to the philosophers of emerging modernity, human nature is capricious and selfish, if not wicked. In order to survive in such a state, the individual must accept a set of self-imposed rules, laws, contracts and, compulsion. Hemmed in by her own limits, the modern individual constructs for herself a cage of self-preservation, passion and controlled violence.

Machiavelli represents the first thinker to break with the Ancients regarding the questions of how to achieve the good life. While ancient political scientists such as Aristotle consider good political action, Machiavelli insists that key to successful action and to the prince’s stable state is force.\textsuperscript{14} Only arms will bring about the two main goals of the prince, namely, power and glory. The name of the main enemy of the prince’s power and glory is fortuna, a completely capricious and unexplainable force. This fortune favors the brave and to become brave, the prince needs the quality of virtu.

Machiavelli becomes distinctly modern in his conception of virtues. Against the classics, he claims that virtuous qualities cannot lead the prince to success. The idea of keeping one’s word as honorable (fides), for example, is for Machiavelli a mistake. Instead, since the nature of people is “variable” and “wicked,” Machiavelli advises a new prince to use brute force as well as guile. The prince needs to combine the attitude of “the fox and the lion”.\textsuperscript{15} Machiavellian prince thus becomes a consequentialist: do evil for the good to come out of it.\textsuperscript{16}

The on the individual autonomy and the rejection of traditional morality yield an important question for modern political thinkers: On what basis could the


\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Machiavelli, \textit{Prince}, XVIII.

practice of government be conducted once society was no longer a community? If the modern community was no longer a product of nature, how ought the unity of the society be constructed? The answer is scientific replicability and predictability.

The elements of a “new” political science are already present in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, where he separates the questions of how one lives (i.e., the scientific “is” of social and political life) from a normative question of how one should (ought to) live. While the latter set of questions leads to the prince’s ruin, the former set informs the prince about how to “learn to be able not to be good” in order to maintain his state. Hobbes rejoins Machiavelli in deepening the gulf between normative and truth-based or “objective” political science. For Hobbes, good and evil or justice and injustice are mere words. In fact, he translates such normative or evaluative words into descriptive terms. As a non-cognitivist, Hobbes avoids postulating that normative statements are true. No common rule of good and evil can be taken from the nature of the objects. Political science thus passes from a quest for general moral principles of community members’ unity to a quest for amoral grounds of self-interest. In other words, political science is no longer a philosophically-informed study that would include the question of how a human being is to act in a political community (as in normative science), but focuses on how people actually behave (as in descriptive approaches).

**In the Praise of “Science”**

While both Machiavelli and Hobbes depart from ancient political science, only Hobbes thoroughly and irreversibly redefines the concept of “science” itself. Hobbes not only rejects Aristotle but also corrects Machiavelli. Hobbes’s political writings coincide with the scientific revolution of the 17th century, which breaks with traditional modes of inquiry and brings about a focus on the scientific

---


18 Cf. Machiavelli, *Prince*, XV.

19 Researchers have pointed out that while Hobbes’s descriptive theory can stand on its own, his normative theory cannot. See . There is one exception, however: Hobbes’s argument on the right of self-defense. While Kavka claims that modifications to this argument need to be made in order to be normatively sufficient, Hobbes holds that from this right the social obligation can or should be made. Nevertheless, the social obligation relies on Hobbes’s theory of human nature, which clearly is a descriptive theory as it ascribes certain general attributes to human beings.
method. With Hobbes, there is no place in political science for capricious *fortuna*. In his view, the task of political science is to reshape political reality according to mathematical models. It is no coincidence that Hobbes met and corresponded with Galileo, who claimed that the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics. As a result, the investigation of political phenomena needs to obey modern scientific principles. Explicitly eliminating the Aristotelian normative notion of final cause, Hobbes defines science as “the knowledge of consequences.” Such an approach is believed to offer reliable knowledge of the future and overcome the frailties of human judgment that lead to human disasters. It is the knowledge of causes and consequences, for example, that explains the beginning and the termination of civil wars. In order to predict the outcomes of human behavior, the Hobbesian approach to politics begins by examining human nature.

Breaking from Aristotle and Machiavelli, Hobbes first claims that nature created all humans equal. This state of equality, in turn, causes quarrel among humans, due to specific sub-products of equality, namely, competition, diffidence and glory. The state of equality, yielding the war of all against all, is “the natural condition of mankind,” in which the life of man is “nasty, brutish and short.” In order to exit from this war, men construct an “artifact”, i.e., the state, and obey to the sovereign’s laws. The causes of this self-imposed political obligation are fear from death and man’s own calculated interest in living safely, as well as the desire for ease, and authorization. In short, with a proper understanding of causes and consequences, Hobbes firstly believes to be able to predict and reshape political reality. Secondly, his argument fatally strikes the Greek concept of a benevolent nature, composed with hierarchical goods of which the *polis* makes men participants. Hobbes’s view of human nature, and therefore politics, is illiberal as it


22 This argument may be reminiscent of Habermas’s critique of the development of modern sciences rooted in positivism. Such development has made the study and the use of politics a technical discipline concerned with problems of prediction and control, thus losing its link with the practical cultivation of character. However, Habermas’s critique concerns modernity and science as shaped by a later era of the Enlightenment, to which he credits the merits of the possibility of a rational, “scientific” understanding of the world. Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *Theory and Practice*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973 and Habermas, Jürgen, "Modernity Versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, no. 22, Winter, 1981, 3-14.

requires the highly limited individuals to give up their liberties in order to be able to exit the brutal state of (their own) nature.

Because of Hobbes’s illiberal conception of “man,” his understanding of the political commonwealth is equally illiberal: “The liberty of the subject lies therefore only in those things which, in regulating their actions, the sovereign has predetermined.”

While the aim of this article is not to demonstrate that Hobbes makes no provision for the fact that a sovereign may be subject to the same illiberal inclinations as other men, it is clear that the emergence of modern human sciences results from a fragmentized knowledge of human beings. Moreover, one can recognize in Hobbes’s approach the strong tendency to demonstrate political truths as if possessing the certainty of a geometric proof. Modeled on the presumably reliable method of geometry, his “science of politics” is supposed to resolve conflicts affecting his country. In such a calculated understanding of politics, opinions are silenced and dissent thwarted. This goes into direct opposition to the concept of liberty, according to which censorship is morally wrong and dissent vital. The study and the discipline of politics thus become illiberal as is the Hobbesian state. In brief, political science ultimately becomes modern as its “founder” Hobbes thoroughly re-conceptualizes science, “illiberalizes” human nature and provides heuristic links between the modern times and the scientific study of political phenomena.

The Makings of the Founder: Turmoil, Influence and Prediction

Hobbes most deserves the title of the founder of modern political science since his work satisfies three crucial criteria. The first is a requirement that a founder’s writing coincides with periods of great change and upheaval. For instance, Hobbes is awakened to politics by the civil war in England. Nevertheless, this criterion is insufficient. Faced with turmoil, Machiavelli writes in order to address political disorganization of Renaissance Italy. De Tocqueville seeks remedies for passions that lead France to violent revolutions. Marx responds to lamentable conditions of the working class.

24 Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter XXI.
27 Cf. Wolin, Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought.
The second criterion points to the need of a specific paradigm shift within the field of political science. This criterion requires that when traditional social and political arrangements are breaking down, they must provoke a redefinition of the study politics. What is particularly new in Hobbes (and not in Machiavelli), in this sense, is his belief that political action informed by scientific knowledge brings about political results such as order to irregularities. Moreover, from the outset of *Leviathan*, Hobbes undertakes a thorough task of redefining the concepts of political and philosophical vocabulary. Subsequently, De Tocqueville and Marx follow this modern task of political science to exert influence upon social and political life. For example, not only does de Tocqueville require a new political science for a new world but also compares America and France precisely because he seeks remedies to democratic passions that agitate France. Or, brandishing with revolution, Marx promotes political change that follows the new post-Hegelian science. Marx writes the *Communist Manifesto* in order to explain and promote “the specter of communism.”

The third criterion, finally, points to the fact that an author is not only truly original for his period, while responding to social upheavals, but also sets the scientific terms of the discussion to follow. Hobbes becomes the founder of modern political science as he defines good scholarship by its ability to predict and to be replicated. All subsequent development of political science is not comprehensible without understanding Hobbes’s strategy to examine the causes and consequences. The claim, however, that one can assess political science by the achievements in mathematical-like sciences has particularly burdened “modern” political scientists. One cannot ignore the weight of a contemporary and profoundly anti-Aristotelian belief, which originates predominately in Hobbes, that without mastering an array of quantitative skills a political scientist is no scientist at all.

What seems to most matter in modern political science are order, influence (disguised in scientificity) and predictability. These contemporary emphases of the discipline would without any doubt make its founder proud of his faithful posterity. As Hobbes would claim, politics and the study of it are after all about the scientific method and measurable facts. But what happens to the study of politics if the philosophy supporting such studies is based on an illiberal conception of human nature and of science?


Modern but Illiberal

Beginning with Hobbes, one of the predominant views in the field of political science is the presumption that only if ‘liberated’ from normative claims can political science truly be considered science. This prevailing yet misguided view is profoundly illiberal because it significantly restrains the perspectives that political science takes on the human realities. As we have seen with Hobbes, his illiberal view of human nature leads to an “objective” method of inquiry of politics that predicts, as well as results in, a social construct that allows little to no pluralism.30

A correction of this view has important implications for what we may call the “de-illiberalization” of liberal studies, particularly in the field of social science and philosophy. Pusey and Habermas suggest that “bad science” has its root in the “cognitive attitude” of “scientistic,” i.e., positivist science: in order for the modern science to become reflective instead, it needs to abandon the ideology of “objectivity.”31 A new, or in Habermas’s words “critical,” theory is therefore required to “recognize the telos of society and to normatively evaluate society’s current state as it relates to the fulfillment of that telos.”32 Such a requirement includes the end of the Hobbesian coercion of men and sciences.

There is no doubt that the emphasis on scientific method is essential to any serious study of political phenomena. Science-based approaches in an environment of both rigorous study and knowledge accumulation represent the hallmarks of any department of social science in general and political science in particular. One of the constitutive elements of the field of political science is precisely the field’s scientific orientation. By its scientific orientation, political science retains a proper and rigorous method of inquiry of politics.

However, without the basic understanding of political science as both empirical and normative, and without proper hermeneutical tools to understand the normative nature of political reality, a coherent conception of political science and, consequently, a coherent conception of the purpose of political studies remain incomplete and illiberal. Lacking evaluative criteria, political science may quickly lose its identity, its purpose and its point.33 As claimed by Isaiah Berlin, „When we ask why a man should obey, we are asking for the explanation of what is normative in such

notions as authority, sovereignty, liberty, and the justification of their validity in political arguments.  

All too often the departments of political science narrow down the philosophical and methodological scope of political science to method-driven quantitative approaches. The modern study of politics is in fact deeply rooted in Hobbes’s strategy of replication and prediction. The claim, however, that geometrical-like approaches provide the most appropriate methodology to the discipline represents a particular and unnecessary burden for political philosophers and scientists alike.

This predominant and illiberal view ignores at least two important issues. The first is that scientific beliefs are no more than paradigmatic assumptions of a particular tradition. Political theories can be best understood as paradigms. Paradigms are those universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a particular time and within a particular tradition, provide model problems and solutions to a community of scientific practitioners. The process by which theories constitute the political world is strongly affected by the presence or absence of paradigmatic philosophical elements. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, understanding of the world always implies a structure of prejudgments, which are certified by tradition. The very conditions that allow us to construct the theories and methods of political science are therefore normative, tradition-based and context-given.

Second, paradigmatic assumptions originate in a particular political theory and can therefore only be sustained with a grounding in, and with the knowledge of, political theories that include normative underpinnings. By normative questions, one should understand not only the questions such as “What is good government?” or “Why we ought to obey political authority?” but also the questions on how to make specific policy recommendations and what these good policy recommendations are. By definition, the normative part of political science is action-oriented. Political science can therefore never lock itself up into a pure positivist or descriptive science. Normative approaches, together with value prescriptions, have explicitly or implicitly always been a part of political philosophy as well as in political science more generally.

Inimical to scientific liberty is the claim that political science should be cleansed from normative perspectives. The Hobbesian approach is not all that political science is about. A correction of this view would broaden and facilitate our

understanding of political reality. It is a fact that as a set of conceptual and explanatory understandings of political phenomena, a particular theory relies on the dialogue between concepts and evidence as well as on the ongoing dialogue between values and facts. In order to bring about more liberty to political science, philosophical and epistemological approaches need to additionally emphasize the necessary interaction between values, norms, concepts and data.

Political reality can only be understood, interpreted and both scientifically replicated and predicted when a scientist is aware of the paradigms that frame her scientific approach. As in other sciences, the study of politics faces the problem of the “illiberal nature of liberal education” through the lack of recognition that science is animated by normative sentiments while the nature of those sentiments remains concealed. Political science is neither complete nor liberal if it does not reflect upon its hermeneutical understanding of both political reality and the frameworks of the study of such reality. Encompassing this understanding, normative political theory becomes a necessary condition for any science-oriented and liberal aspiration to political inquiry.

Peter Rožič SJ
Santa Clara University
Email: prozic@scu.edu


38 Cf. Habermas, Modernity Versus Postmodernity, 3-14.

39 The author would like to thank Richard Boyd and Patrick Deneen as well as two anonymous reviewers of Theoria for their valuable comments, suggestions and critiques.


Peter Rožič

*Iliberalno zasnivanje moderne političke nauke i njegove implikacije za savremeno proučavanje politike*  
(Apstrakt)


**KLJUČNE REČI:** Osnivač, političke nauke, Makijaveli, Hobs, moderno, neliberalno.