The Gap Between Political Discourse and Scientific Discourse

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give a philosophical outline of the great divide between the field of the political and the field of the sciences. In Modern philosophy of political science, politics is thought as representing humans whereas science is thought as representing non-humans.

The initial categorization of the political field takes us to Plato’s philosophy. By means of the allegory of the cave in his dialogue *The Republic* Plato describes the way that society is divided into two parts, a political world and a scientific world. Both worlds are radically cut from each other. These lines of the break are analyzed in Latour’s *Politics of Nature* (2004).

The first break is between the access to the truth and the scope of the social or public life. According to the allegory’s metaphorical language philosophers must get rid of the tyranny of social life, of politics, in order to obtain access to the truth.

The second break is the fact that the scientist returns to the cave in order to apply the objective knowledge of the impersonal world outside. The scientist was able to obtain this knowledge exactly because he got rid of the captivity of social life. And exactly this (objective) knowledge will be applied to impose order and silence in those places where disputes and controversies are caused.

Again here is no continuity between the applied knowledge (the scientist’s absolute objective principles) and the disputes within social, public life. Up to now, political and scientific discourses are still thought as separated fields whereas both politicians and scientists are challenged to bridge the gap.

In this paper we want to deals with the philosophical ideas of the evolving relationship between politics and science, between humans and non-humans. With Latour (2004) we argue that the notion of politics should cover the representation of both humans and non-humans. Moreover, signs are clearly present that the distinction between humans and non-humans cannot be maintained. In view of the politics of concern, in any case, this dichotomy cannot persist, since both dimensions are connected, interrelated and of mutual influencing one another.
The question concerning the gap between political discourse and scientific discourse takes us to the initial categorization in the history of political science. By means of the allegory of the cave in his dialogue *The Republic* Plato describes the way that society is divided in two parts, a political world and a scientific world. Both worlds are radically cut from each other. These lines of the break are analyzed in Latour’s *Politics of Nature* (2004) were he describes the division between the political and the scientific discourses. Political and scientific discourses are thought as completely separated fields. The political discourse takes place at the heart of a representation process of individuals, citizens, trying to get a grip on their particularities, complaints, desires, needs and interests. The process of political representation is volatile, unstable and incomplete in principle, due to the nature of those who are represented. It is a kind of representation that needs to be rearticulated time and again to avoid ending up in a totalitarian system. The scientific discourse is presented and presents itself as having direct and privileged access to the truth, unhindered by the resistances offered by individual human and non-human obstacles. On the contrary, it is usually presented as having direct access to the realm of transparent truth. In this politics of the representation of nature, mathematics plays a crucial part, due to the fact that it seems to be the only method to achieve certain knowledge (François & De Sutter 2004: 132). This gap between political discourse and scientific discourse gives rise to two fundamental ruptures.

The first break is between the access to the truth and the scope of the social or public life. There exists no possible continuity between the world of human beings and the access to truth. In the classical Platonic view, truth is seen as existing outside there and is not made by human hands. According to the allegory’s metaphorical language philosophers must get rid of the tyranny of social life, of politics, in order to obtain access to the truth. Truth is completely separated from the life-world and can be obtained only by turning back of this life-world.

The second break is the fact that the scientist returns to the cave in order to apply the objective knowledge of the impersonal world outside. The scientist was able to obtain this objective knowledge exactly because he got rid of the captivity of social life. And exactly this objective
knowledge will be applied to impose order and silence in those places where disputes and controversies are caused. Again here is no continuity between the applied knowledge and the disputes within social, public life. The scientist’s absolute objective knowledge is seen as the only possible answer to the problems from the life-world.

Besides the two fundamental ruptures that arises form the gap between the political discourse which is representing humans and the scientific discourse which is representing non-humans, most of the (global) political controversial issues are identified as complex hybrids (Latour 2004). We cannot simply speak any longer about people’s preferences as such. A differentiation between humans and non-humans (Haraway [1985] 1991) is artificial and hence no longer accurate. In modern philosophy of political science, politics is thought of as representing humans where science is seen as representing non-humans. Since we have never been modern (Latour 1993), both political science and science are challenged to deal with complex issues, the so-called hybrids.

Based on the philosophy of Bruno Latour and Donna J. Haraway we will elaborate on the question how political science has to go beyond the edges of the classical division between objects and subjects, between humans and non-humans. In this paper we sketch a philosophical approach to the problem of how political science has to deal with the global political controversial issues – where humans and non-humans are intertwined. The paper deals extensively with the philosophical ideas of the evolving relationship between politics and science, between fact and value, between humans and non-humans.

First we will explain the artificial division between sciences and politics, using Plato’s allegory of the cave. To continue we will show how humans and non-humans are interrelated (Haraway [1985] 1991) and we will argue that the notion of politics should cover the representation of both humans and non-humans (Latour 1994). Finally we make the case for building bridges between politics and science. This dichotomy cannot persist, since both dimensions are connected, interrelated and of mutual influencing one another.
The initial categorization of the political field takes us to Plato’s philosophy. By means of the allegory of the cave in his dialogue The Republic Plato describes the way that society is divided in two parts, a political world and a scientific world. Both worlds are radically cut from each other. These lines of the break are analyzed and criticized in Bruno Latour’s Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy (1999, 2004). The first break is between the access to the truth and the scope of the social or public life. According to the allegory’s metaphorical language philosophers (followed later on by scientists) must get rid of the tyranny of social life, of public life, of politics, of personal feelings, of what people are moved by, in order to obtain access to the truth.

Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been build, as the exhibitors of puppet-shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets. (Plato, The Republic, Book VII: 514)

The dark cave where the social and political life takes place (although represented as an imprisonment by Plato –see figure 1) can be abandoned by some privileged few to behold the reality outside. Yet if a random prisoner would be offered the opportunity to observe this outside reality, he would not be able to do so. The prisoner would retain the illusion that the shadows or the illusions are more genuine than what can be seen outside. Only by means of our education human being will be capable to turn around ‘the organ of knowledge of becoming together with the entire soul, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being’.
Figure 1. Plato’s Cave (http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm)

“Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature something of this sort should happen to them: When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light, was unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw, what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly? And if also one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him?” “Far more real,” he said.

II. “And if he were compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out?” “It is so,” he said. (Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII: 515)
This first break brings about an absolute separation between the living environment of the people and a potential access to the truth. In between there is no continuity, there is no link. The only thing that remains is the absolute split with social life, community life, with political life, as opportunity condition for the access to the outside truth. Science and social life are being opposed against each other the same way as light and darkness or truth and ignorance are. And it is exactly because of this strong opposition that science in its capacity can glare even more in its being untouchable.

The second break is the fact that the scientist returns to the cave in order to apply the objective knowledge of the impersonal world outside, a knowledge that has been stipulated in laws. The scientist was able to obtain this knowledge exactly because he got rid of the captivity of social life. And exactly this (objective) knowledge will be applied to impose order and silence in those places where disputes and controversies are caused, in the shady prison of slaves. Again here is no continuity between the applied knowledge (the scientist’s absolute objective principles) and the disputes within social, public life.

[T]he Scientist, once equipped with laws not made by human hands that he has just contemplated because he has succeeded in freeing himself from the prison of the social world, can go back into the Cave so as to bring order to it with incontestable findings that will silence the endless chatter of the ignorant mob. (Latour 2004: 10-11)

The knowledge about the objective world that absolutely differs from the social world is used to get things straight and to halt the disputes and controversies. Here the political aspect is excluded. The controversies, around which an audience unites, are nipped in the bud. Starting from this allegory and the display of these two breaks Latour demonstrates the link between a particular idea of science and a particular view on politics and public opinion. The political sphere is here, within this allegory, narrowed down to what is obstructing the truth from being reached. Truth is narrowed down to the one objective truth of an idealistic world outside, which at the same time is a truth that should offer the solutions to the disputes that the public opinion is concerned about and around
which controversies are ensuing. Thus the political aspect is smothered by the irrefutable principles of science (Latour 1999: 24).

Latour aims to get rid of the substantial break between the field of the sciences and the political field. By means of Plato’s philosophy Latour demonstrates how the (Plato-originating) portrayal of human being is the basis for the separatism between the epistemology and politics (Latour 1999: 23). In Modern philosophy of political science, politics is thought of as representing humans where science is thought of as representing non-humans. Since we have never been modern (Latour 1993), political science is challenged to deal with complex issues, the so-called hybrids. With the person’s concrete actual concerns and on a global scale the actual topics on the political agenda Latour indicates where nowadays the two worlds of knowledge and politics are inextricably bound up with each other. Actual political issues cannot be classified any longer based on the ancient categories. Latour founds his thinking on the work of Haraway who in *Cyborg Manifesto* had drawn attention to the artificial separation between humans and non-humans (Haraway [1985] 1991).

3 The Artificial Separation Between Humans and Non-Humans

The separation of humans and non-humans that supports the classical dichotomized representation of reality has prevailed for centuries. Dualisms are not innocent because all the time both a hierarchy and a power component are involved. Binary positions were among other things the models of the structural linguistics with its search for ageless and partly immutable structures. Bipolar twin concepts are for example positive/negative, man/woman, sense/body, reason/intuition, subject/the other, subject/object, science/politics, etc. The best-known linguistic couple is Ferdinand de Saussure’s ‘signifiant/signifié’, the signifier and the signified (de Saussure [1916] 1967). The 20th-century science considered the binary logic as the essential form of intelligent activity. With her ‘cyborg’ metaphor Haraway aims to break binary positions, to dissolve boundaries and to clear the way for diversity.
Signs are clearly present that the distinction between humans and non-humans cannot be maintained. In view of the politics of concern, in any case, this dichotomy cannot persist, since both dimensions are connected, interrelated and of mutual influence. What would be the relevance of deconstructing this gap in our system of knowledge? In this respect, Latour invokes the term ‘hybrid’ (Latour [1991] 1997: 7), while Haraway speaks of ‘cyborg’ (Haraway [1985] 1991: 149). The latter term is borrowed from science fiction, a cyborg being a creature that is partly human and partly machine. We can easily recognize the cyborg in ourselves. Just think what our lives would be like without glasses, sets of dentures, or medicines. Extremer but also clearer examples are pacemakers, artificial heart valves, plastic knees or hips, and further prostheses of all kinds. But even when in perfect health, we can hardly move without a bike, car or public transport. Without a computer or a mobile, most of our communication would come to a halt. As a result, we can not longer speak of two completely separated categories of humans and non-humans. At least, we need to arrange them on a continuum. The political meaning of bridging the gap between humans and non-humans is at least the recognition that every new non-human entity brought into connection with humans modifies the collective and forces everyone to redefine all the various cosmograms, or the ways in which the life-world is organized.

It is thus fairly obvious that non-humans intervene in human life. But how do humans intervene in the space of non-humans? Here we can appeal to cases involving research. For example, if we want to know the temperature of an object, we cannot measure it without intervening, that is, without an effect – however tiny – on the very temperature we want to measure. Indeed, the act of measuring temperature affects the heat balance, and so the researcher has an influence on the state of his or her object under investigation. But there is more. What about those who decide what is to be the object of inquiry? They determine the way in which the interesting facts should be isolated, or the way in which they should be represented. Consequently, they decide what facts should be produced and in what format we shall come to know about them. Humans, scientists, are the ones who determine how the world will come into view. Their particular perspectives establish the way in which scientific objects will be publicly presented, creating the contexts from within which non-humans are brought into existence. Representation and its epistemological constraints presuppose a
choice for a specific perspective, a choice with social and political relevance. Hence the importance of politics of fact or politics of concern which we will explain below (François & De Sutter 2004).

The political discourse is extended from the sphere of humans to the sphere of non-humans.


Haraway aims to reconsider the objectivity. She exceeds the ancient opposition between objectivity and subjectivity and hence follows in the footsteps of Husserl who in his The Origin of Geometry (1936) based the objectivity on the subjectivity (François 2009).

Haraway allots a special place to the ones on the fringes of the social institutes, based on the surplus value of their dual view. The fragmented and singular subject is able to enter into partial and prejudiced agreements; moreover he or she is responsible for both the produced knowledge practice and the produced and built objects. It is a process of never-ending knowledge acquisition and it cannot claim any kind of universalism whatsoever. Completed knowledge practices that raise themselves to universal knowledge are autarchic and hence oppressive. Only partial perspectives preserve the promise of an objective perception (Haraway [1987] 1991: 190). In imitation of many critical philosophers (she refers to Habermas, Foucault and Latour) Haraway puts into perspective the truth presumptions of the Western science by drawing attention to both the historical specificity of the scientific knowledge claims and the way that knowledge acquisition and science are interwoven with interests and power.

Embodied objectivity is opposed to objectivism. In objectivism the so-called variables and all links with subjects of the object to be known have been stripped as much as possible so as to acquire knowledge about an object that is stripped as much as possible of the living environmental factors, an object as it actually is. On the other hand embodied objectivity is a negotiated truth going from different locations (Tickner 1996: 456). Rational knowledge is a process of critical interpretations going from different ‘fields’, different locations, different power blocks, different so-called categories and different ‘decoders’. According to Haraway rational knowledge is based on prejudice and it arises from power-sensitive conversations (Haraway [1987] 1991: 196).
Latour also accounts for the new epistemology and he transforms the renewal as a transition of *matters of fact* to *matters of concern* which are in line with the shift of the *politics of facts* to the *politics of concern* (Latour 2004). This transition pithily contains the cultural criticism against the constitution of our society, a constitution based on the two separated (platonic) chambers of science and politics.

4 **Bridges Between Political Discourse and Scientific Discourse**

Political Science is extraordinary in that here the two fields on either side of *The Great Divide* converge. The one side of the break, science, uses the other side of the break, the political praxis, as research field. The question then is whether the political scientist will respect or deny the connection between the two fields.

A meticulous analysis of the concept ‘politics’ is beyond the scope of this paper. For this concept we refer to the traditional description in 1936 of Lasswell: *who gets what, when, how* (Goodin & Klingemann 1996: 8). This broad interpretation of politics is the basis of *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Goodin & Klingemann 1996). But in spite of this broad interpretation it still is common practice to speak of *Political Science as a discipline*, where the way that political sciences could further evolve to a *discipline* and to a *status of science* happens to be the central issue. Here reflection on political science remains to be embedded in the ancient constitution with its separated political and scientific chambers. The political sciences have a keen interest in being a discipline with the statute of (objective) science. Hence the political science threatens to lapse into the objectivism’s reductionism. The political scientist –as a traditional scientist aiming to develop a scientific activity in the wake of Modernity– must pattern himself on the example of the so-called hard sciences (physics if not mathematics). Consequently the break between the two fields, the political and the sciences, does not disappear. Let us have a look at the more recently description of politics given by the *American Political Science Association* (APSA 2009)
What is Political Science?

Political science is the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior. Political science subfields include political theory, political philosophy, political ideology, political economy, policy studies and analysis, comparative politics, international relations, and a host of related fields. (For a good cross section of the areas of study, see the list of APSA Organized Sections.) Political scientists use both humanistic and scientific perspectives and tools and a variety of methodological approaches to examine the process, systems, and political dynamics of all countries and regions of the world (APSA 2009).

We would like to add two remarks. The first remark has to do with the main topic of political science. We observe an over-emphasis of the study of political structures. If we look at the history of political science much effort has been done to study political structures. Most of the interest is investigated in the way the public is gathered and in the way the public is represented or has to be represented. There is less interest in the issue around what the public is gathered. Studying political structures is what we could call a condition of necessity but it is not a sufficient ground. Both topics deserve to be studied. An interesting example about the issue around what the public has to be gathered is the phrase *The personal is political* formulated by the radical feminist Carol Hanisch in her 1969 essay of the same name. She was criticizing the fact that some typical female issues, experiences, needs and belongings, were of no interest for political analysis. More examples could be given. What we want to argue is the fact that what is officially political is only the tip of the iceberg. The discovery of this hidden continent remains the great breakthrough of science studies and of political science (Latour 2007). To Latour, politics is different from what political scientists study. Politics “is the building of the cosmos in which everyone lives, the progressive composition of the common world” (Latour: 2004). The central question however remains *Who is determining the political agenda?* and *How does the political scientist give account of the topic (s)he is studying?* The observation about the unbalanced investigation within political science is expressed by Latour as follows.
From Hobbes to Rawls, from Rousseau to Habermas, many procedures have been devised to assemble the relevant parties, to authorize them to contract, to check their degree of representativity, to discover the ideal speech conditions, to detect the legitimate closure, to write the good constitution. But when it comes down to what is at issue, namely the object of concern that brings them together, not a word is uttered.

(Latour 2005: 15-16)

In a second remark we want to emphasize the widespread attention to diversity within the methodology. “Political scientists use both humanistic and scientific perspectives and tools and a variety of methodological approaches” (APSA 2009). Within political science there is the need to make space for a variety of methodological approaches. There is the growing importance of quantitative research and thus the mathematization of political sciences by the use of statistical analysis. Besides this, attention has to be paid to the interpretive methodology as a legitimate approach within political science. Political scientists throughout the world who are interested in studying political phenomena share a desire to see, understand, and explain the social world and hence the life-world. Therefore, a variety of methodological approaches has to be included into graduate curricula, disciplinary journals, research funding programs, and in political science in general. The inclusion will carry enormous potential to enliven and enrich political science’s current ways of seeing, studying, understanding, and explaining.

Both remarks have to do with the shift from the politics of fact to the politics of concern. The central question here is the following. Which guarantees are created by the community of political scientists in order to map the politics of concern, the political issues around which a public is gathered? The public gathers around what exactly? Otherwise said, what exactly does ‘res’ in ‘res publica’ mean? We would like to remind that in the ‘res-publica’ of our Latin heritage, lies the word ‘res’ which means at once an assembly and the topic, issue, or state of affairs that is at stake. In this original meaning of the ‘res-publica’, both components of the political are bound together: the structure and the issue what the structure is about; or to put it otherwise the assembly and the
topic around what the public is assembling. The key move from the \textit{politics of fact} to the \textit{politics of concern} is to make all definitions of politics turn around the issues instead of having the issues enter into a ready-made political sphere to be dealt with. This means a Kuhnian revolution within the political science. The \textit{politics of fact} is trying to define politics in the absence of any issue, as a question of procedure, authority, sovereignty, right and representativity. The \textit{politics of concern} finally makes politics turn around topics that generate a public around them. Referring to the enucleated version of pragmatism proposed by Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam –Latour calls it pragmatism at its best; Latour is defining the \textit{political} not as an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but as what qualifies a type of situation.

Instead of saying: ‘Define a procedure and then whatever will go through will be well taken care of’, pragmatism proposes that we focus on the objects of concern and then, so as to handle them, produce the instruments and equipment necessary to grasp the questions they have raised and in which we are hopelessly entangled (Latour 2007: 814).

It would be a great advance for political science studies to redefine its main topic of the progressive composition of the common world. Therefore political science has to recognize its two basic elements in a balanced way. The first element is the question about the things politics should turn around and the second element is the question how it is going to turn around those things. The challenge for the community of political scientists will be to represent the study of the political praxis going from its diversity. Together with Haraway we want to argue in favour of building bridges between the bipolarity objectivity-subjectivity. Then objectivity will be reformulated as an embodied objectivity and the methodological procedure to get to this embodied objectivity will not imply selecting and reducing the subject of investigation. The method then no longer defines the potential investigation topic. Together with Latour we want to argue in favour of a \textit{politics of fact} to a \textit{politics of concern} adjustment. Here the key issue is the investigation topic around which
political issues are being publicly conceived. In this way the method here is a means to represent
the politics of concern.

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