

A Study of PhD Programs in Political Science, and the Future of Political Theory

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Abstract

Isaiah Berlin began his seminal work, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” by considering the existential status of political theory. He questioned whether political theory was alive and well, or whether his colleagues were correct in suggesting that political theory was dead or dying. Berlin argued that, from an intellectual perspective, political theory cannot die. Yet the status of political theory as a subfield in our discipline may be institutionally insecure. In this paper, I examine political science doctoral programs to evaluate whether political theory’s future is stable, or existentially uncertain. I consider whether each PhD-granting department offers doctoral students the opportunity to concentrate on political theory as a major or minor subfield of study. I likewise consider whether doctoral students are required to complete political theory coursework, regardless of their fields of study. I compare political theory’s status in doctoral programs with both substantive (e.g., American politics, comparative politics, international relations, etc.) and methodological fields of study, and find that political theory has a uniquely tenuous future. I conclude by calling, without compromise, to preserve political theory as a field of study equal to our empirical subfields.

Introduction: Does Political Theory Still Exist?

Originally published in 1962, Isaiah Berlin's titular question "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" asks readers to consider the intellectual necessity of political theory as, during the mid-twentieth century, many political scientists – empirical and normative alike – challenged the subfield's importance and purpose (Germino 1963). Scholars questioned political theory's value within political science, as the field's explanatory capacities were expanding, and some questioned political theory's practical purpose because pragmatic concerns were disappearing from the field's scope (Cobban 1953; Voegelin 1952). Still, others noted that there were few twentieth century thinkers and works which were central to the field and subfield (Easton 1951). If these concerns were legitimate, political theorists and their subfield would be in a perilous position.

Given these critiques, several thinkers concluded that political philosophy and political theory were teetering on the edge of existence.¹ Leo Strauss argued that "Today, political philosophy is in a state of decay and perhaps of putrefaction, if it has not vanished altogether" (1957, 345-346). James Holton claimed that "Political philosophy exists today as little more than a shadow of its former self" (1961, 75), Neal Riemer analyzed the reasons for the "bankruptcy of political theory in the Western World" (1962, vii), and Peter Laslett bluntly proclaimed that "political philosophy is dead" (1975, vii). While political theory was considered absent for much of the mid-twentieth century, Berlin's article served as an intellectual refutation of the asserted decay and inevitable death of political theory as he claims that it can never die.

Despite Berlin's powerful argument in support of political theory as an irreplaceable method of inquiry, he has little to say about its status as a field of study. In other words, even if Berlin successfully argues that political theory is intellectually necessary within the broader field of political science, academic departments of political science might not reflect this claim. To explore whether political theory is in decay, we must empirically investigate the status of the subfield as there is no necessary correlation between a subfield's importance or contributions, and its growth or decay as a field of study. We might grant Berlin victory in the former, without speaking to the latter while it is that latter point – that political theory is deteriorating as a field of study within departments of political science – that I turn to in this paper. To determine whether political theory will flourish or decay, we must consider how extant institutional arrangements will affect political theory's future health.

Departments as they are currently constructed are the product of prior institutional arrangements and thus, to look at the employment of political theorists today may be a lagged effect of previous decisions. Instead, to consider whether political theory is in danger of institutional demise, I investigate one of today's institutional arrangements, the political science PhD program, to consider what the subfield might look like in the future. If PhD granting departments do not offer political theory as a primary field of study, then they cannot produce political theorists for future employment. This can indicate that the subfield is in the process of withering away within political science as "An academic

¹ I do not believe this is the place consider whether political theory and political philosophy are synonymous, similar, and yet different in some important respects, or all together separate entities. I have chosen to group them together in this paper since Berlin speaks of political theory as being rooted in, and professing philosophy. I agree with and endorse Berlin's position.

field is stable only if there are institutional structures in place” which can support the field (Corbett 2011, 567).

The four substantive areas of political science in American political science departments are, classically, American politics, comparative politics, international relations, and political theory (APSA 1962). After evaluating the requirements of 110 American political science PhD programs, political theory is the sole substantive subfield absent in a sizeable number of departments as only 62.73% of programs (69/110) allow students to primarily focus on (i.e., major in) political theory. Conversely, students can major in American politics in 96.36% of programs (106/110), while comparative politics and international relations are both available as majors in 93.64% of programs (103/110). This research reveals a disturbing reality for political theory; while it is not dead, the field of political science may render it deceased in the future.

The Necessity of Political Theory

Isaiah Berlin argues that unlike empirical questions, some philosophical questions cannot “satisfy conditions required by an independent science” (2013, 192). Quandaries, including, “what is justice?” and “why should one obey the law?” cannot be empirically resolved, no matter the degree of methodological sophistication. There are “no wide agreements” on the meanings of some central, political concepts, and therefore “the prospects of establishing a science in this field, whether empirical or formal, seem remote” (2013, 195).² Even, Berlin argues, if we agreed about our country’s prospective political goals, disagreements concerning values and purposes, tradeoffs and priorities, and the meanings of each, would persist. These questions could remain agonistic and unresolvable by the methods of empirical political science or, Berlin explains, “the answer to the question ‘What should we do?’ is undiscoverable not because it is beyond our powers to find the answer, but because the question is not one of fact at all” (2013, 201). Perhaps the reports of political theory’s death in the twentieth century were exaggerations, as it can help address these questions and concerns.

Berlin’s argument provides compelling support for the intellectual endurance and necessity of political theory within the increasingly empirical field of political science. When scholars of justice, for example, choose their measurements, they are appealing to theories of justice; as James Holton states, “We are, as political scientists, wittingly or unwittingly political philosophers” (1961, 76). These decisions might be openly considered, tacitly referenced, or obfuscated entirely, but determining the status of justice in a political community requires theoretical considerations of what justice is (and is not), what the scope of justice must include (and omit), and the locus of the boundaries of justice and injustice, amongst other plausible concerns. For Berlin, this example alone may suffice in demonstrating political theory’s significance as he argues that there is “no obvious method” in settling many questions about justice (2013, 191).

Justice is not unique as we lack empirical means to resolve many social, cultural, economic, and overtly political questions that, nevertheless, are central to a holistic understanding of political science. For example, while one can measure human migration patterns, empirical measurements cannot determine who ought to be considered a citizen, or what citizenship should entail (Kymlicka & Norman

² Berlin largely echoes W.B. Gallie’s (1956) notion of “essentially contested concepts.”

1994). Disputes in the United States about asylum seekers, border walls, birthright citizenship, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and mass deportations have been news stories, and topics of presidential debates, but empirical measures are insufficient in determining what the country's immigration and citizenship policies ought to entail. Similarly, while one can argue that democracies tend to produce more favorable empirical outcomes for citizens than do nondemocracies, American democracy was most famously justified by an appeal to philosophically "self-evident" intrinsic equality in the Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, empirical studies of democracy may reach different conclusions if democracy is understood as primarily procedural (e.g., Schumpeter, Dahl) or deliberative (e.g., Rawls, Habermas) which can shape perceptions and policies regarding, at a minimum, campaigns, elections, and voting procedures. Our understanding of justice, citizenship, and democracy³ cannot entirely satisfy the conditions of empirical science, and different understandings of each inevitably produce different outcomes for actual people. These debates do not stagnate in academia, but have substantive, real-world implications and as such, a philosophically bankrupt political science may reproduce the inequities uncovered through an uncritical examination of empirical phenomena.

Dangers of a Theory-Less Political Science

Political science, absent political theory, may reify the political conditions that empirical investigations uncover. Berger and Luckmann define reification as the "apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will" (1966, 89). Reified human activity, including political activity, is thus depicted as a product of the "nature of things" (ibid) since the "world of institutions appears to merge with the world of nature" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 90). A political science which lacks philosophical foundations and considerations can only report upon "facts" within the confines of some apparently natural underlying conditions but cannot contest the conditions themselves.

Conversely, political theory has a unique capacity to challenge the empirical political world by intellectually undermining its faulty foundations and assumptions.⁴ Berlin states,

The first step to the understanding of men is the bringing to consciousness of the model or models that dominate and penetrate their thought and action. Like all attempts to make men aware of the categories in which they think, it is a difficult and sometimes painful activity, likely to produce deeply disquieting results. The second task is to analyse the model itself, and this commits the analyst to accepting or modifying or rejecting it, and, in the last case, to providing a more adequate one in its stead (2013, 208).

This is one central task of theory; to render transparent the underlying "models" of human existence and dispute them, should the need arise. These models may be practical, and part and parcel of our political world, and/or the models upon which empirical investigations are established.

Berlin explains that as we analyze these models, we help to clarify them, and "clarification may expose shortcomings and subvert what it describes. That has often and quite justly been charged against

³ This list is, maybe obviously, not nearly exhaustive.

⁴ By "political," I mean it in the broadest sense which can include the formally political (i.e., governmental), alongside the social, cultural, economic, etc.

political thought, which, at its best, does not disclaim this dangerous power” (2013, 209). Political theory is, in this respect, best thought of as a Socratic gadfly; an uncomfortable but necessary challenge to institutional authority, and academic orthodoxy. As such, political theorists engage with empirical phenomena and, simultaneously, political theory is the subfield best equipped to challenge the structures upon which empirical phenomena reside.

Conversely, a theory-less political science which does not philosophically question faulty political models is inherently status quo reinforcing, rather than status quo challenging. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno examine the tendency of empirical science to constrain other forms of thought, and to reproduce the status quo. Beginning with the enlightenment – the era defined by the rise of empirical science – measurability and calculability became fundamental principles for investigators. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that, for empirical scientists, “anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion” (2002, 3). Forms of thought are reduced to a “mathematical apparatus” and knowledge is limited to the observable and repetitious, while “science could manage without such categories” as “substance and quality, activity and suffering, being and existence” (ibid). Speculation “about intelligible worlds is no longer merely forbidden but senseless prattle” as the philosophically possible may not adhere to the socially accepted methodologies of the empirical sciences (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 19).

Sole reliance upon empirical methods, and mathematics specifically, Horkheimer and Adorno argue limits thought to the immediate, the actual, and the reproducible. Dixon-Román explains “The scientific method and quantification *became* central features of the guiding paradigm in contemporary social and behavioral science. Under these terms, the positivist paradigm became normal science, an almost taken-for-granted epistemological lens for knowledge production in the social sciences, with quantitative methods as its chief hallmark” (2017, 52). Since speculation beyond the immediately verifiable is denounced as unscientific and unreal, and reproducibility is revered, the world which exists appears to be inevitable, and natural. As such, a theory-less empirical political science can only report upon calculable phenomena, and present them as though they were natural occurrences, which reifies them, and reinforces the status quo.

Decades later, Bertell Ollman’s scathing critique of political science echoed Horkheimer and Adorno. Ollman, reiterating concerns raised by Charles Lindblom in his 1981 American Political Science Association (APSA) Presidential Address, states that political science has proven “more useful to those wishing to retain the status quo than to those who want to change it” (2000, 555). Rogers Smith, an APSA president himself, later noted that while few works of political science generated mainstream readership, those which reached public consciousness had a “political tilt that is understandable but disturbing” as the works “tend to celebrate many traditional American values and institutions” rather than presenting challenges to these dominant norms (2015, 369). Ollman, in critiquing behavioralism and rational choice theory, states that the approaches begin with the operating assumption of “All things being equal” which “makes even the worst real world inequalities acceptable (not worth bothering about) by rendering them irrelevant to the task at hand” (2000, 556). He rhetorically asks his readers, “Guess to whose benefit?” (ibid) by which he, Smith, Horkheimer, and Adorno would answer, to the further benefit of those who already benefit from the status quo.

Perhaps ironically, the anarcho-capitalist Murray Rothbard makes similar arguments regarding the tendency of a purportedly objective empirical political science to reify the status quo. Rothbard states,

The difference between the political scientist and the political philosopher is that the “scientist’s” moral judgments are covert and implicit, and therefore not subject to detailed scrutiny, and hence more likely to be unsound. Moreover, the avoidance of explicit ethical judgments leads political scientists to one overriding implicit value judgment—that in favor of the political status quo as it happens to prevail in any given society. At the very least, his lack of a systemic political ethics precludes the political scientist from persuading anyone of the value of any change from the status quo (2002, 25).

Philosophically uncritical investigations into empirical phenomena, however informative and accurate they might be, reify social, political, and economic conditions as though they are natural, rather than challenge them in meaningful respects. Neutrality is, in and of itself, a philosophical position, as Berlin argues that “Scepticism, cynicism, refusal to dabble in abstract issues or to question values, hard-boiled opportunism, contempt for theorizing, all the varieties of nihilism are, of course, themselves metaphysical and ethical positions” (2013, 206) Yet, Rothbard presents the alternative to an entirely reified political science that does not offer theoretical challenges; a political science that in fact does challenge underlying conditions, but may does so tacitly, and unsoundly.

One might, for example, in one’s empirical investigation, uncover the objectively “best” public policy in support of eradicating poverty. Progressives might be ecstatic, while conservatives might oppose the policy. Marxists might view the policy as insufficient while anarcho-capitalists, like Rothbard, might view the same policy as grossly overstepping governmental bounds. An empirical political scientist, should they refuse to endorse a political proposal based on their own findings, is doing so based on a political theory of scientific neutrality. Yet, endorsing one’s own findings is *tacitly* expressing a political philosophy, which is likely within the confines of one’s own research. However, if empirical political scientists are necessarily “unwitting” political theorists, as Holton proclaimed, their theoretically unsophisticated arguments in favor of, or against any empirical finding may be unconvincing at best, and unsound at worst.

Research

Political science PhD programs in the United States can help train the next generation of scholars to not just research and report on political facts, but to put forth challenges to the status quo, and offer potential, imaginative solutions to political conundrums. To do so, political theory must be a principal component of a comprehensive political science education. Given the historical and extant concerns about the state of political theory, I sought to answer the question of whether the subfield is currently in decay. I utilized the most recent *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of political science programs (ranked in 2021) which includes 120 institutions.

Utilizing information from departmental websites and graduate handbooks, when applicable, I sought to answer the following questions:

- Q1: is political theory available as a major field of study for PhD students?

- Q1a: if not, is it exclusively available as a minor field of study?
- Q2: are there required political theory courses that all doctoral students must complete?

I denoted instances wherein departments mentioned that specific subfields could serve as a doctoral student's major or minor,⁵ or if an institution stated that students could complete comprehensive exams in a specific subfield as a major or minor field. After researching the requirements of all 120 programs listed by *U.S. News & World Report*, I omitted ten from the study for various reasons including those not currently offering a PhD in political science⁶, or using exam structures that were far outside of the norms of political science PhD programs.⁷

Out of 110 programs, 106 allow students to major in American politics (96.36%), and 103 allow students to respectively major in either comparative politics or international relations (93.64%). Despite some unique aspects of how the subfields are treated across universities, doctoral students, overwhelmingly, can study three of the four traditional political science subfields.⁸ Contrarily, only 69 out of 110 programs allow students to major in political theory (62.73%). Of the 41 programs which do not offer political theory as a major field of study, 8 allow students to solely minor in the subfield. Generously, 70% of institutions allow students to major or minor in political theory. Political theory is the sole subfield which is nonexistent or given a secondary status in a substantial percentage of political science departments.⁹

Furthermore, only 15/110 (13.65%) of departments require doctoral students to complete at least one political theory course, while 97/110 departments require doctoral students to complete at least one methodology course (88.18%), and the 2022 APSA survey found that doctoral students complete, on average, 3.83 methods courses (APSA 2024). The hyper-prioritization of methods employed in the empirical subfields, coinciding with the denigration of political theory further reinforces the notion that political theory is not a substantial component of political science.

As previously argued, political theory's absence may produce a political science which reifies the existing social, economic, and political conditions that disproportionately benefit the status quo. After dividing the 110 programs into quintiles, the top programs generally offer political theory as a major option as 20/22 schools allow students to primarily concentrate in theory, and one of the two outliers (Emory University) offers theory as a minor. Conversely, only 14/22 schools in the second quintile, 12/22 in the third, 10/22 in the fourth, and 13/22 in the fifth quintile offer political theory as a major field of

⁵ Terms such as first field, primary field, etc. were used by some institutions.

⁶ Mississippi State, for example, only offers a PhD in public policy and administration, while the University of New Orleans shuttered its program.

⁷ University of Hawaii, for example, bases comprehensive exams on student dissertation proposals, rather than subfields, while the University of Dallas has an interdisciplinary structure to its program, including testing components.

⁸ Three departments offered unique approaches to American politics: Baylor University offers American politics/constitutional law, Kent State University offers American politics and policy, and Northern Arizona University offers American politics and public administration. The same three departments combine comparative politics and international relations into one subfield.

⁹ Even these paltry results may underestimate the dearth of political theory training occurring in doctoral programs as informal deterrents may discourage students from potentially majoring in political theory. Arizona State University, for example, offers all four subfields, but warns potential applicants interested in political theory to "consult with the academic unit prior to application."

study for doctoral students. Political theory has become a privileged subfield, reserved most often for the upper echelon of political science doctoral students. Given the well-known employment trends in research institutions, these students could very well produce a disproportionate amount of political theory scholarship. In turn, this entrenched elitism may pacify the critical potential of the subfield.

Discussion: The Strange Silence of Political Science

In 2022, then-APSA president John Ishiyama initiated a presidential task force, “Rethinking Political Science Education” which published its findings in 2024. The task force report’s section on The Undergraduate Curriculum persistently mentions theory-laden content learning objectives that are best satisfied by political theory, or by theoretically-minded empirical researchers. Two of the Content Learning Objectives are:

2. Explain and evaluate diverse theoretical and disciplinary approaches to the sources, ethical distribution, and uses of power.
3. Explain, apply, and evaluate approaches and theories (such as empirical, normative, critical) that address political phenomena. (APSA 2024, 15).

These two objectives unabashedly align with theoretical approaches to political science, as *ethical* distributions of power are amongst the topics that Berlin would render outside of empirical methods, and the latter objective is wholeheartedly a call to political theorizing.

The Undergraduate Curriculum section likewise includes “Value Objectives” that are, as suggested, entirely value-laden. Most clearly, the report states,

In contrast to the behavioral revolution—when proponents of behavioral research in Political Science imported ‘technical proficiency in the search for reliable knowledge...and the exclusion of value specification as beyond the competence of science’ (Easton 1969, 1054)—we must recognize that our role as Political Science educators is to challenge students to engage with diverse perspectives and understand the principles that undergird free, democratic societies (APSA 2024, 24).

There are numerous additional statements in the report about the need to, for example promote democratic, and civic values (APSA 2024, 4, 12, 14, 20, 24, 25) and teach political (i.e. democratic) ethics (APSA 2024, 13, 15, 17, 22). In fact, the report argues for “maintaining [the Wahlke report’s] recommendation of grounding Political Science majors in the ‘philosophic foundations of, and relations between normative and analytic inquiry’” (APSA 2024, 16). It appears, then, that the task force desires for undergraduate education to not be *solely* focused on empirical political science, as it is critical of such a position.

An unmistakable issue remains; if we are not training political theorists, nor expecting empirical political scientists to be knowledgeable in political theory, there will be a lack of qualified experts to teach values, ethics, and similar notions to undergraduates. Within the section on The Graduate Curriculum, a single sentence is offered, stating the need “to meet the content, skills, and value learning objectives outlined in the undergraduate committee’s report” (APSA 2024, 31). Unfortunately, the lack of

graduate students who are prepared to tackle the “values” of the Undergraduate Curriculum is unaddressed by the section on the Graduate Curriculum.

Within the Preface, Ishiyama states that the report makes “no mention” of subfields (APSA 2024, 8). As such, the task force presents no concern about the comparative lack of political theory training at the graduate level, nor does it raise any issues with how this might impact the field’s critical, or teaching capacities. Yet, the report states that all doctoral students “should have training in analytic theory, whether formal or informal approaches, and critical thinking ... research design, quantitative methods ... and qualitative methods” (APSA 2024, 36-7). The task force was not shy about stating the minimal empirical training they believe is needed for all doctoral students, while political theory remains absent from consideration. This silence is particularly strange since APSA often presents itself as an organization focused on contributing to social and political welfare and, as I have argued, political theory is the subfield best equipped to offer philosophically rigorous endorsements of political change and can fulfil, minimally, the “Values Objectives” published in the Undergraduate Curriculum section of the task force report. The task force aptly notes “Determining what is and what could be allows one to argue about what should be” (APSA 2024, 21) and while the Undergraduate Curriculum section focuses on that critically important normative component, it remains absent from the Graduate Curriculum section.

APSA’s silence on the ongoing decline of political theory is not unique. The removal of political theory as a subfield at the Pennsylvania State University led to significant outcry and debate about the place of political theory within political science (Kaufman-Osborn, 2010; Brown 2010). Since then, programs at the University of Kansas, University of South Carolina, University of Iowa, Temple University and, most recently, University of Maryland have either reduced political theory to a secondary status or eliminated it altogether. There has been comparably little outcry about these cuts, even amongst political theorists. Perhaps many political theorists have either accepted political theory’s forthcoming demise or are ignorant of its perpetually depreciating status. Regardless of the reasoning, political theorists must be made aware of the existential threat that the subfield faces, or we will all suffer from the consequences of our inaction.

Conclusion: Challenges in Political Science

The theme for the 2024 APSA Virtual Research Meeting was “Challenges in Political Science.” A challenge plagued Isaiah Berlin in the 1960s, and he rose to the challenge in defense of political theory. Without significant exaggeration, political theory has had existential threats to it for, at least, the last 75 years. Even political theorists who cherish and respect the subfield cannot agree on the best pathway(s) forward.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the question of preserving the most ancient of our discipline’s approaches to understanding politics remains unanswered.

For political scientists to respond to the challenges we face today, and the unforeseen challenges we may face in the future, we need to go beyond the realm of political reporting, and we must recapture and recenter political theory. A political science that exclusively investigates empirical phenomena and presents its results is little more than methodologically sophisticated political journalism. As Stephen

¹⁰ See, for example, the noted dispute between Kaufman-Osborn and Brown, and the dispute between Ross Corbett (2011) and Andrew Rehfeld (2010).

Elkin puts it, “When great political questions arise, especially when citizens run around in the streets raising them, it would be pleasing if political science offered something more than what a newspaper columnist well versed in recent polling data and electoral statistics can muster” (1987, 15). Yet, whereas mainstream news media reaches the eyes and ears of millions of Americans daily, academic research is not likely to be accessed by political elites, nor the general public (Avey and Desch 2014). While political scientists debate how to best “bridge the relevance gap” between academia and government (Wood 2014), much scholarly work – by one measure, nearly 50% – published in political science journals is not even read by academic peers, let alone the public (Thelwall and Sud, 2016).

Our present moment is one in which rights and liberties are being eroded, economic inequality is continuously expanding, global democracy is backsliding, and racial, gender, and sexual injustices remain omnipresent. No, political theory is not the sole subfield that addresses these concerns, but as Wendy Brown articulated, it is not

a matter of political theory having a monopoly on concern with the oppressed but rather that the modes and tools of analysis most astutely and subtly articulating the powers constructing these subjects and relations have issued largely from the humanities rather than social sciences (2010, 684).

Bluntly, the dearth of political theorists being trained today means that fewer imaginative political theorists will exist in the future. While our empirical methods continue to advance in precision and sophistication, they alone cannot serve in evaluative capacities. Advanced empirical analysis can further detail what our political circumstances are, but devoid of serious theorizing, they cannot adequately undermine, challenge, or imagine a world beyond these conditions.

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