The Challenges Confronting Political Science in the 21st Century: A South African Perspective

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Abstract

Unprecedented global upheavals have led political scientists to interrogate their knowledge constructs in a world where the only constant is change. This paper explores five challenges to academic political science generally and to South African political scientists in particular. These include the need to localise international relations theory with an emphasis on the emancipatory dimensions; exploring the nexus between technology and politics; incorporating political anthropology into mainstream political science syllabi; rising to the challenge of governing Africa's cities; and the dangers of over-specialization in an era that demands the use of a broader academic lens.

Introduction

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, Professor Ken Booth eloquently stated, "*Our work is words, but our words do not work anymore."* While Booth referred to the scores of "Sovietologists", "Kremlinologists" and other Cold War specialists whose object of study had suddenly disappeared, his statement still has relevance today. The scale and magnitude of global change has only intensified since those euphoric days of November 1989 and the discipline of Political Science has been challenged as the pace of global developments renders some of its theoretical constructs obsolete. Given these tectonic shifts, what we teach needs to be critically re-examined as we struggle to make sense of this rapidly changing world. Indeed, Tocqueville's call for a "... *new political science to understand the new times"* (Del Rosa, nd: 2) has never been more prescient nor more urgent.

This paper examines five substantive challenges confronting Political Science as a discipline in the twenty-first century, with a special emphasis on South Africa. These five challenges include: creating a better "fit" between international relations theory and the changing world we inhabit; exploring the interface between technology and politics; the pressing need to incorporate

political anthropology into our core political science modules; the challenge of urban governance; and the dangers of over-specialization.

<u>International Relations Theory</u>

Tectonic changes in the global economic and political landscape have fundamentally challenged international relations theory. The current Eurozone crisis is clearly the European Union's gravest existential crisis in its history. Europe's economy has begun contracting and, as more people are laid off work we witness the rise of neo-Nazi movements in countries like Greece while far right political parties enjoy electoral ascendance in countries like France. For some it brings back memories of Europe in the 1930s, which saw the ascendance of the likes of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco – precisely the sort of scenario a united Europe was designed to prevent. The Eurozone crisis has also clearly demonstrated the myth of a united Europe, as Brussels has been unable to articulate a common, coherent and cohesive vision (Elliott, 2012: 7). Indeed, what we have witnessed is the resurgence of narrow national self-interest over regional collective interests.

All of this holds severe implications for international relations theory. Consider David Mitrany's functionalist and Ernst Haas' neo-functionalist approaches to integration, Karl Deutsch's sociological liberalism or the institutional liberalism of Keohane, Young, Rittberger and Levy – all of whom based their analyses on a united Europe (Jackson and Sorenson, 2008: 101-110). Is a realist world of national self interest rearing its head once more? These are some of the challenges that global change poses to international relations theory.

Global change also manifests in other ways. The London School of Economics' Professor Danny Quah's recently published research demonstrates that the economic centre of the world will have shifted from somewhere over the mid-Atlantic in the 1980s to somewhere between India and China by 2050. While the five largest economies in the world in 2010 were the United States, China Japan, India and Germany, by 2050 it will be India, China, the United States, Indonesia and Brazil (Peacock, 2012: 11). It is estimated that between 2011 and 2016, most new centa-millionaires[2] will emanate from India. Centa-millionaires will increase by 114 percent in India, 106 percent in China, 76 percent in Russia, 67 percent in Singapore, 65 percent in Hong Kong and 59 percent in Brazil (Davie, 2012: 5). With the eastward shift in economic

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[2]Those worth US$100 million and more.

wealth comes a shift in political power. Notice the rising political influence of the BRIC[3] countries and the growing importance of the G20 relative to the G7 (Cilliers, Hughes and Moyer, 2011: 1).

Historically, there has been a strong correlation between power and knowledge. It was not coincidental that the global ascendancy of the United States also saw the dominance of American international relations in academia (Bischoff, 2010: 123). Consider the impact of Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz and Henry Kissinger. With the rise of India and China, an attempt is being made to refashion international relations theory to better reflect Indian and Chinese political thought.

In their International Relations in India: Bringing Theory Back Home (2005), Kanti Bajpai and Siddhart Mallavarapu attempt to examine the applicability of realism, with its emphasis on states, to liberalism, with the emphasis on democratic peace, to Gramsci's notion of hegemony and critical theory, to the Indian context. Other more ambitious efforts at theorizing by Indian academics move away from the Eurocentric bias of most international relations theory, focusing on the writings of Kautilya who served as Chief Minister of Chandragupta (321-291 BCE), founder of the Mauryan Empire, and the Buddhist King Ashoka who espoused peace, tolerance, love and understanding as governing precepts (Solomon, 2012: 65-78). In a similar attempt to indigenize international relations theory, Chinese scholars are also turning to Chinese thinkers like Shang Tzu and Han Fei-tzu (Smith, 2009: 272) as they seek new tools with which to comprehend the fast-changing world that we inhabit.

The need for a genuinely post-Western, more inclusive form of theorizing was also expressed by Giorgio Shani (2008) who noted that most writing by non-Western scholars is "... *mere mimicry of derivative discourses of the modern West."* Shani stresses that there are alternatives to the nation-state and points to the Islamic concept of "ummah" and the Sikh concept of "Khalsa Panth" – both of which assert the sovereignty of the deterritorialized, transnational community of believers.

The need for an alternative discourse is not merely the prevailing Eurocentric bias, but also emanates from the fact that the 200 "nation-states" are not really working for the 7 billion human beings on the planet. Indeed, one could argue that existing international relations discourse is a discourse of the few, privileging the few at the expense of the many. The alternative discourse would not only be less Eurocentric, but also, in the words of the inimitable Robert Cox, both

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[3]The BRIC nations refer to Brazil, Russia, India and China. Whilst South Africa has been added to the bloc for political reasons, it clearly should not belong to this powerful group of nations on the basis of economic merit.

counter-hegemonic and emancipatory (Cox, 1999: 3). The urgency to create a radically different discourse from the prevailing one is put most cogently by Immanuel Wallerstein who noted, "*The modern world system is in the process of coming to its end. This is not per se good or bad; it all depends on what will be constructed in its place. We are in effect being called upon to construct our utopias, not merely to dream about them. Something will be constructed; if we do not participate in the construction, others will determine it for us*" (Quoted in Swatuk and Vale, 1999: 1).

The urgent need for an alternative counter-hegemonic and emancipatory discourse is best reflected in the moribund nature of South African foreign policy. Consider here the debate on UN Security Council reform. Far from challenging the hegemony of the *status quo*, Pretoria merely reinforces it, albeit this time lending it an African face or two. How else can one explain South Africa's goal of a seat on the Security Council (Venter, 2003)? This approach demonstrates little understanding let alone critique, of the constitutive elements of the international system – relative power, political authority, hierarchy and hegemony (Cornelissen, 2009: 6). In similar fashion, far from articulating an emancipatory discourse in its voting pattern on the UN Security Council, South Africa jettisoned the human rights of Africa's citizens while standing up for the interests of the Bashirs and Mugabes – the abusers of those rights (Kagwanja, 2008: 35). The flawed state-centred approach of South African foreign policy (Bischoff, 2010: 127) is reinforced by the fact that many of Africa's states are states in name only (Smith, 2009: 272).

The challenge confronting South African international relations scholars is to indigenize international relations theory ensuring that it reflects an emancipatory and counter-hegemonic discourse – one which not only challenges the hegemony of big powers, but also reflects the discourse of one billion Africans as opposed to 54 Heads of State on the continent.

<u>Technology and Politics</u>

Technology has always been a driver of social change in general and political change in particular. The publication of the 1,282-page Johannes Gutenberg Bible in August 1456 was not merely a technological feat but a seminal event that had a major impact on world history. Rodney Castle (2011: 137) commented, "*Until Johannes Gutenberg's time, bibles were handmade, scarce and expensive. Producing them, whole pages at a time on a press, made bibles cheaper and more accessible. Gutenberg's activity led to the democratization of Christianity, the reduction of the power of the priests who recited and interpreted the bible for*

the rest of the community; and the consequent reduction of the power of the Church. The publication of the Gutenberg Bible led by a short route directly to the Reformation itself."

In the first few years of the twenty-first century we witnessed You-Tube, Facebook and Twitter revolutionise politics. We witnessed then-Senator Barrack Obama effectively deploy this technology in his presidential campaign, and President Obama make use of the same technology to deepen American democracy. Government became more accessible to citizens when government information became readily available to the public, making decision-making more transparent and soliciting continuous public feedback (Katzen, 2011: 2285-2286). In South Africa, too, with the dysfunctional nature of the "presidential hotline" exposed, President Zuma has taken to Twitter.

The field of international relations has also been revolutionised by this new technology. Consider here the sub-field of diplomacy. Despite the formal severing of diplomatic relations between Washington and Iran following the 1979 Revolution resulting in the closure of their respective embassies, the US State Department established a virtual Iranian embassy. In a world first, Washington effectively bypassed the Tehran government while seeking a relationship with the Iranian people (US Virtual Iran Embassy, 2012).

Sadly, all this is reflected in neither the course outlines of diplomatic studies nor Politics generally. There is not a single module on Technology and Politics in any South African university. Instead, law professors are at the forefront of academic studies in understanding the full import of the world's 900 million Twitter users and 2.5 billion Facebook users (Bennett, 2012). Douglas Rutzen and Jacob Zenn (2011: 53) have explored the interconnection between new technologies and fundamental freedoms, especially in light of autocratic governments targeting Facebook groups, social networks and online communities. In their ground-breaking study, they conclude that such groups are protected "associations" under international law and that individuals need not meet in person to exercise their freedom of association.

These new technologies also impact politics in other ways. In his recent book The Leaderless Revolution: How Ordinary People Will Take Power and Change Politics in the 21st Century, Carne Ross (2011: 6) eloquently argues that such technologies are undermining the power of governments and putting power into the hands of communities and "super-empowered" individuals. This phenomenon was graphically illustrated on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, Sanaa and now Damascus. The Arab Street used Facebook and Twitter to organize against authoritarian regimes (Rutzen and Zenn, 2011). In similar fashion, the Occupy movement began

on 17th September 2011 in Liberty Square, Manhattan's Financial District, and spread to over 100 cities in the United States and over 1,500 cities globally through the use of social media. The movement's website states that it aims to "...*fight back against the richest 1 percent of the people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future*" (About OccupyWallStreet.org: 2012).

The Arab Spring and the Occupy movement also underline the inability of national governments and state-based international structures and institutions to arbitrate events as effectively as they used to. State power is in decline. A senior US State Department official succinctly stated, "...*we are in a world where governments, as a whole, have less power than they once did*" (Ross, 2011: 6). In similar fashion, confidential briefing papers prepared for the UN Secretary-General Ban ki-Moon noted "...*the declining importance not only of the UN itself, but also of governments in managing the world's problems...*"(Ross, 2011: 7). Despite this, the teaching of political science remains too state-centric. In South Africa, the state-centric nature of political science is best reflected in the Afrikaans term *staatsleer.* However, political science cannot be about the state, but about people; this needs to be reflected in the modules we teach. Small wonder then that Jean Blondel and Pacal Venneson (2010: 523) powerfully argued, "... *the discipline should cease to be concerned exclusively with politics in public bodies and in particular in the state: it must also devote itself to politics at the level of the `man in the street'.*"

Such a `man on the street' approach may contribute to the resolution of one of the most challenging problems of our time – the environment. A recent UN paper powerfully summarized the enormity of the problem confronted by concluding, "*Our planet's ability to sustain life, as we know it, is under enormous strain*" (Ross, 2011: 6). Other research has indicated that the incidence of phytoplanktons (the micro-organism at the start of the marine food chain) has dropped significantly, endangering the sustainability of all life on the planet (Bischoff, 2010: 130). On the African continent, climate change is expected to see increased water stress and a concomitant rise in conflict (Cilliers, Hughes and Moyer, 2011: xiv). While attempts have been made to address the challenge of environmental degradation, these state-based initiatives (the Rio Earth Summit, the Kyoto Protocol, the Durban Summit and Rio Summit) have all been wrecked on the rocks of national self-interest. An approach focused on all 7 billion human beings may fare better than the current statist approach. Such an approach has resonance in the Revolutionism dimensions of the International Society approach which emphasises humanity and revolutionary change, and is anti-state in its character. Such an approach has a long intellectual tradition, going back to Kant (Jackson and Sorenson, 2007: 136).

Political Anthropology

If the state is weakening in the developed world, it has always been a fragile affair on the African continent (Herbst, 2000). This fragility is especially pronounced currently, where state sovereignty is challenged by the politics of identity – ethnicity, clan or religious fundamentalism. Indeed, Africa's 3,315 ethnic groups were always an uncomfortable fit within Africa's 54 "nation-states" (Number of ethnic groups in Africa, 2012).

The politics of identity has seen the rupture of Sudan into North and South, the split of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the disintegration of Somalia into autonomous regions like Somaliland and Puntland while at least 20 mini-states are under the rule of some clan militia or personal fiefdom. Moreover, the disintegration of existing states seems to be gathering momentum if one considers the resurgence of a virulent Hausa-Fulani ethno-centric nationalism coupled with an Islamist identity in northern Nigeria; the ongoing conflict of the Saharawi people over Moroccan rule; the simmering identity question of Berbers in Algeria; the unresolved Hutu-Tutsi conflict in the Great Lakes region; and the tense relationship between the Kikuyu and Luo in Kenya.

In each of these cases traditional structures of authority are re-asserting themselves to replace the retreating Westphalian state, and as political scientists we do not understand these new structures because we have never studied them. As an undergraduate political science student I was exposed to political anthropology – to Fortes and Pritchard's classic, African Political Systems (1970) which focused on the governing structures of the Ngwato in Botswana, the Bemba in Zambia, the Ankole in Uganda, the Zulu in South Africa, the Nuer of Southern Sudan and the Tallensi in Ghana. I was introduced to Ted Lewellen's (1983) ground-breaking book on political symbolism, the origins of early states and centralized and decentralized pre-industrial political systems. I also had to study Schapera's (1963) work on the privileges and powers of tribal office, the relationship between rulers and subjects, and the different forms of tribal government.

None of this is being taught in political science courses in South Africa today. The demise of political anthropology also reflects the decline in area studies that emphasizes the importance of cultural distinctions, made up of specific histories and beliefs in the subject of study (Bates, 1997: 167-168; Khosrowjah, 2011: 132). Small wonder then that political scientists were wrong-footed with the start of the Jasmine Revolution on the streets of Tunis, which morphed into the Arab Spring (Taleb and Blythe, 2011: 33).

The need to bring political anthropology back into the mainstream of our syllabi is reflected in the resurgence of tribal and clan structures in post-Gaddafi Libya. It is also reflected in the fact that Eurocentric modes of conflict resolution on the African continent often result in failure. Traditional African modes of mediation, such as the use of the Xeer system in Somalia to mitigate inter-clan rivalries and the use of tribal elders are needed (Malan, 1997: 17). Such a perspective is also important when trying to democratize Arab systems of government, not through Western notions of democracy, but one that reflects Arab culture and is in keeping with Islamic norms and concepts like *al-hurriya* (freedom), *al-musawat* (equality), and *shura* (consultation) (Solomon and Butler, 2008: 258).

Once more, in this area I find law professors far ahead of their political science counterparts. Michael van Notten's (2005) <u>The Law of the Somali: A Stable Foundation for Economic Development in the Horn of Africa</u> examines Somali customary law and how it could assist the traditional institutions of the Somali people to merge with the modern world economy. This is important in a country that is the quintessential poster child of a failed state lacking legislative authority (Fick, 2006: 288).

<u>The Challenge of Urban Governance – The Rise of the City-State</u>

The phenomenal growth of urbanization and the concomitant re-emergence of the city-state constitute a severe challenge to urban governance. Kevin Davie (2012: 5) has recently pointed out that even by the most conservative estimates, China will have 130 cities with more than one million inhabitants by 2025; this is more than the United States and Europe combined. Of these, 90 are expected to have more than five million people, while eight will have more than 10 million. To put matters into perspective, Davie notes that New York is the only city in the United States to have a population of more than five million. In similar fashion, to ease urban "congestion", Egypt is building 65 new cities (Obeng-Odoom, 2010: 14).

The impact of urbanization on the African polity will be more severe given its fragility. Africa's urban population was a mere 15 percent in 1960. It then rose to 35 percent in 2006 and is expected to reach a staggering 60 percent by 2020 (Beall, Guha-Khasnobi and Kanbur, 2010: 187). Unfortunately for many of these migrants from rural areas, the promise of the bright lights of the city and the expectation of a higher standard of living are not met. Sprawling informal settlements characterised by poor housing and poorer infrastructure or "slums" is the result. Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africa has the dubious reputation of having the "*... highest prevalence of slums of any region in the world"* (Beall, Guha-Khasnobi and Kanbur, 2010: 188). Small wonder

then that Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2010: 13) observed that the "...*movement to cities in Africa is a journey from rural poverty to urban misery.*"

Given the youthful profile of Africa's population (Cilliers, Hughes and Moyer, 2011: xii), unmet expectations, frustration and urban misery might well result in urban and political violence. Consider the fact that these dynamics propelled young Arabs onto the streets of Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi. From 2009, 77 percent of African governments tried to stem the tide of urbanization (Obeng-Odoom, 2010: 14). In its most extreme form this was reflected in Zimbabwe's Operation Murambatsvina ("remove the filth") where the military was used to clear out squatter settlements and "restore order" (Obeng-Odoom, 2010: 14). Of course, the fact that these informal settlements also happened to be strongholds of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) also entered their calculations. Such efforts to stem the tide of urbanization, however, are bound to fail for three interrelated reasons. First, African governments do not have the necessary financial resources to invest sufficiently in rural areas to make staying there an attractive option to would-be migrants. Second, they do not have the capability to physically stem the urbanization tide. Consider here the disastrous example of influx control in apartheid South Africa. Third and most importantly, the tide of demographics is against them. Given Africa's youthful profile, the continent's population is expected to continue to grow rapidly. By 2050, a quarter of the world's population will live in Africa (Cilliers, Hughes and Moyer, 2011: xiii).

If one cannot stem the tide of urbanization, how then do we manage it? Fundamentally, this is an issue of urban governance and calls for the "...*emergence of forms of hybrid governance that bring informal, indigenous or Afropolitan ideas into dialogue ... with western-derived ideas about formal, modern urbanism"* (Myers, 2011: 103). Such an approach to urban governance, with its emphasis on inclusivity, could result in our cities deepening democratic practice while overcoming the politics of identity alluded to above. Political scientists, however, are rarely part of this debate. Indeed, Garth Myers (2011: 103) observed, "*Strangely, political science seems only an occasional presence in African urban studies, when it ought to be a central field to our analyses, because these are such fascinating years for urban politics in Africa.*"

The field of urban governance should have special resonance to South African political scientists for three reasons. First, 68.5 percent of South Africans are urbanized (Todes, Kok, Wentzel, Van Zyl and Cross, 2010: 333). Second, local government remains the Achilles' heel

of governance in South Africa. Third and more important, is the restive nature of our cities, seen in service delivery protests that occur every day in some part of our country.

<u>Inter-disciplinarity, post-disciplinarity and the danger of over-specialization</u>

It should be obvious that the great challenges posed by global change demand that academics adopt a wider lens when viewing social phenomena. Indeed, in his treatise <u>What is Political Science? What Should It Be?</u>, Bertell Ollmen (2012) refers to the two myths of political science: (1) that it studies politics, and (2) that it is possible to study politics separated from economics, sociology, psychology and history. In similar vein, and perhaps more courageously, Colin Hay (2010: 5124) argues, "...*if it is accepted that the distinction between, say, the political and the economic is an artificial one, then it is but a small (and quite logical) step to acknowledging that the disciplinary boundaries that often circumscribe our analytical endeavours are no less artificial. It is not much more of a step (though a step nonetheless) to the idea of inter-disciplinarity – a recognition of the potential value to be gained from the trading of insights across disciplinary boundaries; and no great leap from there to the idea of post-disciplinarity – the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries altogether in pursuit of an integrated social science.*"

While it has become evident that political scientists will, at the very least, need to widen their focus to supplement their disciplinary tradition with insights from other disciplines in order to adequately comprehend political phenomena in their correct context, rating bodies increasingly place their emphasis on ever narrower specialization. This, of course, reflects what happens in the natural sciences, and even there it is problematic if one considers that the renowned South African paleo-anthropologist, the late Professor Philip Tobias, actually held a Ph.D in genetics. Indeed, the apparatchiks running these rating bodies go even further: not only do they want political scientists to stay within their disciplinary boundaries; they do not want academics to stray from their sub-discipline! Such over-specialization holds terrible costs. Writing on this issue, Yale University's Ian Shapiro (2002: 589) has noted that, "*The specialization that has divided political philosophy from the rest of political science has been aided and abetted by the separation of normative from empirical political theory, with political philosophers declaring a monopoly over the former while abandoning the enterprise of "positive" political theory to other political scientists. This seems to be to have been bad for both ventures. It has produced normative theory that is no longer informed, in the ways that the great theorists of the tradition took it for granted that political theory should be informed, by the state of empirical knowledge of politics. A result is that the normative theorists spend too much time commenting on one*

another, as if they were themselves the appropriate objects of study. This separation has also fed the tendency for empirical political theory to become banal and method driven – detached from the great questions of the day and focused instead on what seems methodologically most tractable. Both types of theory have evolved close to the point where they are of scant interest to anyone other than their practitioners. This might bump up citation indexes and bamboozle tenure committees in the desired ways, but it scarcely does much for the advancement of knowledge, about what is or ought to be the case in politics."

Conclusion

Political science has come a long way from those heady days in 1950 when Lasswell could confidently state that politics is about who gets what, when and how? Indeed, the world of 2012 scarcely resembles the world of 1950. Immanuel Wallerstein was correct in his assessment that the modern world system is coming to an end. As political scientists we need to interrogate our existing knowledge constructs in relation to this rapidly changing reality. We need to indigenize international relations theory and emphasize creating an emancipatory and counter-hegemonic discourse. We need to explore the nexus between technology and politics to deepen our democracy by empowering the margins in our societies. We need to embrace political anthropology as we strive to understand non-Western forms of governance. We need to use these understandings of traditional societies as we create hybrid forms of urban governance that stress inclusivity as we overcome the politics of identity and difference. We need to heed the call of De Tocqueville and create a new political science to understand the new times by supplementing disciplinary insights with those from other disciplines. In doing so, political science will once more regain its relevance to humanity in the twenty-first century.

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