

Rainer Eisfeld, *Empowering citizens, engaging the public. Political science for the 21st century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 199 pp.

Published this year, a new book by a German political scientist and professor emeritus at Osnabruck University, which is tellingly titled *Empowering citizens, engaging the public. Political science for the 21st century*, is first and foremost a handbook of instructions as to how contemporary political science could (and should) reconnect with the larger public. As the title of the book suggests, on subsequent pages of the publication (and especially in its second part) the reader is offered a thoroughly explained and empirically backed line of argumentation as to why political science can no longer afford to be detached from reality. Instead it should become a science for the people. This statement may seem obvious yet it is backed by bitter remarks from political scientists who, as Eisfeld quotes them as saying, have no illusions that something is wrong with the discipline. And thus, also within the public sphere. Take, as examples, such statements as the one issued by the 2009 Economics Noble Laureate, the late Elinor Ostrom, who in 1998 said: “We are producing generations of cynical citizens with little trust in one another” (p. 4). Or the words of the guru of the discipline, Italian theorist of democracy, Giovanni Sartori, who in 2004 contended that political science – at least its so-called American-style, largely quantitative version – “is going nowhere” (p. 5).

Eisfeld, as it can be inferred from reading the book, fully agrees with these opinions and seeks a way to redirect the science, which he spent his whole adult life developing, from the current depressing path leading to irrelevance. In his view, to become “great again” the discipline needs to, first and foremost, abandon some of its old habits. Namely, it should depart from the earlier tendency of being a “technique-based, methodology-centered and profession grounded” discipline (p. 8). One whose mainstream approach – as Eisfeld boldly states after Roger Smith – has come to be “symbolized by multiple-regression equations” (p. 6). The domination of, and obsessive adherence to, quantitative

methods, which are probably to make an impression that political science is indeed a science, have however showed many shortcomings of such research. It is of course commonplace to say that the social reality is a complex phenomenon, one that requires multidimensional ways of analysis and interpretation. However, it is often forgotten that reliance on predominantly quantitative indicators, and belittling the qualitative approach, has proved wrong on many occasions. Most recently, the limitations of a method-focused approach were most visible during the “shock and awe” moment that came after the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential race in 2016. Weren’t we all, in both cases, surprised by the discrepancy between opinion polls, political analysis and the results of the votes? Those who focused on statistical data and limited their analysis (and forecast) to such traditional indicators as gender, place of residence, profession, income and so on were surely surprised. Basing analytical processes solely on them may have created an illusion of solid research, but it was not enough.

The question is what is needed now? We are already aware of the negative processes that are taking place in the decade of post-truth and growing populism. Clearly, in times of such social turmoil as we are experiencing now, an applicable science of democracy is in great demand. One that would not only further develop the already complex, and at times incomprehensible, mechanisms of the political system, but also better correspond to current social moods (mainly driven by fear). Thereby, it could more adequately respond to citizens’ expectations of politics. To do so it needs to be “problem-based, people-centered, and politically grounded” (p. 8). Recognizing this need, yet also being realistic in his assessments, Eisfeld writes that “Political science cannot help immunize people against folly nor, for that matter, against anger or even hate. But it can attempt considerably more than it is doing at present to spread historically informed analytical thinking and careful, normatively inspired reason among the public. And it needs to sound the alarm” (p. XIX). Yet to do so it has to become more relevant and comprehensible for lay audiences. Otherwise, to use the 2009 words of Joseph S. Nye as reported by “The New York Times” and quoted by Eisfeld in the book, the discipline may be “moving in the direction of saying more and more about less and less” (p. 5).

The financial constraints that are being faced by political science today are also boldly presented in the book. They are analysed mainly through American examples, which may come as a surprise to many readers, especially in Poland. Here, as well as in other Central European states, the challenges of financing research, particularly social science research, are all too well-known

to academics. However, there is little recognition of the American wider-political context which determines allocation of funds to research. This also influences the evolution of the discipline. For this reason the part of the book where Eisfeld analyses the challenges of allocating grants to research projects in the United States seems particularly interesting. Even more so when we realize that American political sciences have also, unintentionally, joined a race in which they rival with natural sciences for both funding and prestige. This rivalry has surely contributed to the growing obsession with quantitative method-driven approaches; those that make it go in the direction which Eisfeld perceives as inadequate for today's challenges.

Thus, to counteract the above-mentioned negative trends Eisfeld suggests a change within the discipline. In his view, 21st century political science should commit itself to the following: a) make ordinary citizens the "intended beneficiaries" of the knowledge it produces; b) encourage academics to write and speak as public intellectuals seeking to advance both knowledge and human freedom; c) promote civic education that emphasizes self-government over government and informed involvement over passive spectatorship; and d) blow the whistle when politicians or governments attempt to deceive citizens (p. 10).

We can interpret from the book that the consequences of such change will lead to evolving a culture of public engagement. This, in turn, would also allow us to challenge tendencies of post-truth and fake news, and emphasize the role of significant themes in academic education and research. For Eisfeld the latter are the areas where, in his view, severe democratic erosion is occurring. They include: escalating income and wealth disparities which, as he argues, push democracy towards plutocracy, ubiquitous change which triggers insecurity and aggression, and racist prejudice which polarizes societies. In addition, there are also worrisome counter-terrorism strategies which subvert civil liberties. Eisfeld perceives these problems as pressing and advocates that they are addressed ahead of other issues. For this to happen in-depth research needs to be carried out and its results entered into broad public narratives. Only then will the discipline evolve in a direction where problems take priority over methods while public relevance is more important than sophisticated specialization.

These recommendations are developed in greater detail in part two of the book, *Issue areas*. While it is not the job of the reviewer to summarize the book, or any of its parts, it is for sure the reviewer's task to make an assessment. Therefore, I will say that the second part of the book offers

the most interesting insights. It provides younger researchers with a very solid set of recommendations that an older master of the discipline has willingly shared. Even if at times they seem provocative, they are certainly worth considering and keeping in mind, like the recommendation to leave a comfort zone and become an engaged academic.

By encouraging them to take up the role of public intellectual, Eisfeld provocatively suggests that political scientists should follow the path of some economists. He gives Paul Krugman, Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz as examples. While it can be expected that some readers of his book may disagree with the recommendation because of these thinkers' open criticism of the capitalist economy, it is hard to disagree that they have marked their presence in and influenced wider public debate. Efforts to find similarly influential political scientists who offer solutions to current weaknesses of political systems bring less satisfactory results.

The book ends with part three, *Partisanship*. This includes just one, very important, chapter titled *Twenty-first century political science. Politicization of a discipline? A normative science of democracy with empirical rigor*. Eisfeld's reflections included in this part of the book are written, as we read in the introduction, at the "moment in history when the accountability of democratic governments is literally bleeding away, when the hybridization of democratic regimes in Central-East Europe is on the rise and democracies in Western Europe and North America are compromised by the erosion of democratic rules and values" (p. 179). Thus, corresponding to these trends, the political science of democracy, in his view, also becomes inevitably partisan. Furthermore, it has left us no other choice but to acknowledge such fact, and after reading this book, we can do so.

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