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## Methodological Dilemmas of Political Science

**Abstract:** The article identifies and analyses methodological dilemmas in Polish political science in the last fifty years. These dilemmas concern: the object of cognition – its existence and preferred research strategies, the development model of the discipline, methods in political science, methodological identity of political science, the essence of politics and what is political, empirical or theoretical character of political science, the possibility of formulating grand theories in political science, new subdisciplines in political science, political anthropology, individual agency and the ontological status of social groups, value judgments, and axiological neutrality of the researcher. The article concludes that Polish political scientists in the last fifty years have been advocating a complementary position that goes beyond concrete alternatives.

**Keywords:** methodology, dilemmas, political science, political actor, political theory

### Introduction

This paper discusses the methodological dilemmas that Polish political scientists have attempted to resolve over the last 50 years. Many contentious topics have been settled, but others are still very open despite many years of debates. Some are more ontological in nature, while others are explicitly methodological. The paper attempts to identify such contentious issues. Drawing up a list of

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methodological dilemmas, despite strictly relying on the source literature, is a display of a specific interpretation. Interpretation, unlike realism, cannot be escaped at any stage of the research. This also applies to research of a reporting nature (Węgrzecki, 2020, pp. 110–111). The following sections will discuss the contentious methodological dilemmas that have been present in Polish political science over the past 50 years: 1) dispute about the existence of the research object, (whether it is) real or socially constructed, and about the possibility of its cognition; 2) dispute over the discipline development model: positivistic or hermeneutic; 3) dispute about the discipline methods: humanistic, social or mixed; 4) dispute over the methodological identity determined by the field or the discipline itself; 5) dispute over the essence of politics and the political; 6) dispute over the nature of the discipline as a theoretical or empirical science; 7) dispute over the formulation of grand theory within the discipline; 8) dispute over the boundaries of the discipline in terms of independence of its sub-disciplines; 9) dispute over political anthropology, agency and the relationship between the individual and social groups; 10) dispute about value judgements, the axiological neutrality of the researcher and about the functions of science – including ideological functions.

## Contentious issues

One of the fundamental dilemmas, concerns the existence of the discipline's research object – from an ontological perspective. The question concerns the mode of the existence of politics. Does politics exist objectively as advocated by naturalism – or is it socially constructed as suggested by anti-naturalism? Naturalism takes two main forms among Polish political scientists: positivism and realism. Positivism is based on empirical observation and seeks to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Realism appears in two varieties that refer to Marxism or personalism. The former considers – as the first causal factor of politics – deep structures that cannot be observed. The latter is predicated on the idea that it is ultimately a person who shapes the politics, directly or indirectly through ethics and culture.

Anti-naturalism takes the position that political reality does not exist independently of the meaning attributed by the political actors to their actions. Here we are dealing with a double interpretation. First, the actors interpret the political world and, later, their interpretations are interpreted by the observer. Politics is seen here as a social construct produced by political actors.

Tadeusz Klementewicz argues that there are objectively deeper social structures of an economic nature, such as classes and “the contradictions of economic interests as the first causes of serious politics” (2017, p. 43). According to him, cognition in political science is conditioned by the ontology of the cognitive

subject. Like any human being, a political scientist is conditioned by belonging to deeper structures, such as class and contradictions of economic interests. This conditioning leads to ideologically oriented cognition guided by certain values rooted in economics. This can already be observed at the stage of the selection of research topics. According to Klementewicz, there are “serious arguments in favour of the thesis that mainstream social sciences constitute only an ideological form of social consciousness since they naturalise the existing social order” (2017, p. 41). As the dominant form of social consciousness is liberalism, a political scientist liberally inclined will make “representative democracy”, civil society” and “democracy and civil rights” the object of their analysis. Accordingly, the following have disappeared from the research agenda: “problems of socio-economic inequality, exploitation, oppression based on family background, gender or skin colour. Interest in the adverse consequences of turbo-capitalism for the working classes has disappeared” (Klementewicz, 2017, p. 43).

Authors who refer to the philosophy of personalism and the social doctrine of the Church, such as Michał Gierycz, Dariusz Góra-Szopiński, Piotr Mazurkiewicz and Janusz Węgrzecki, consider the (individual) person to be the deeper structure of politics. According to them, political phenomena cannot be explained without reference to reason and the freedom of the person – and, thus, also to ethics, linked to the actions of reason and freedom. The manifestation of the actions of the individual is the creation of culture and religious behaviour. Therefore, a specific cultural and religious formation is a deeper structure, not directly cognisable, but constituting a fundamental condition for specific political action (Gierycz, 2017; Góra-Szopiński, 2007; Mazurkiewicz, 2017, Węgrzecki, 2019).

The anti-naturalist approach in the social constructivist version failed to generate much resonance among Polish political scientists, as opposed to sociologists.

The dilemma on the existence of the research object is very closely linked to the possibility of cognition of what politics is. Epistemology places the cognition of politics in the realm of positivism or understanding – even those who recognise positivism as rational cognition recognise its inadequacy. As a result, they postulate a combination of positivism and hermeneutics. This is the theoretical solution advocated by Barbara Krauz-Mozer and applied in research practice by Radosław Zenderowski by defining concepts within hermeneutics and further applying positivist methodology (Krauz-Mozer, 2005; Zenderowski, 2007, pp. 16–124).

Ontology and epistemology lead to another dilemma: which model should be adopted for the development of the discipline of political science, positivist or hermeneutic? The aforementioned authors and many others attempt to bridge this dichotomy. A common solution is to try to combine both research perspectives. There is general agreement that both are valuable and cannot be

disregarded, although neither is comprehensive. It is, therefore, correct to combine both perspectives. In practice, the positivist approach with incorporated hermeneutic solutions (Zenderowski, 2007) – or the hermeneutic approach – cultivated by philosopher of politics (Filipowicz, 2019, p. 118) and theorists of politics – prevail (Karwat 2006, 2009). Stanisław Sulowski argues not for methodological eclecticism but for an integral approach that harmoniously combines normativism and empiricism (2018, p. 34).

The contentious issue of positivism versus hermeneutics leads to yet another dilemma. What are the appropriate methods of the discipline of political science – namely, the methods of the humanities or social sciences, or perhaps a mix between the two? The solution to the above dilemma depends on advocating a particular ontology and model for the development of the discipline. The fundamental question is whether the object that is politics belongs to the humanities or to social sciences? Depending on which aspects and dimensions of politics are considered, methods specific to the humanities or social sciences will be appropriate in their discovery, description, explanation, and interpretation. The dimensions of politics studied by modern political history, the history of ideas, political thought and the philosophy of politics are investigated using the methods of the humanities. They are used, for example, by Antoni Dudek (historian) (2019), Paweł Kaczorowski (historian of ideas) (2021), Bogdan Szlachta (historian of political thought) (2012) and Zbigniew Stawrowski (political philosopher) (2020). One could say that these works belong to the current of broadly understood hermeneutics. The other dimensions of politics are analysed and explained with the social sciences methods, which combine the positivist and hermeneutic models. Understanding appears, for example, at the stage of defining concepts to later ground the entire research process in positivist methodology. As such, the social sciences methodology is hardly the only one used. There is a consensus among Polish political scientists that the methods of the humanities and social sciences should be combined within the political sciences – a view relentlessly advocated by Barbara Krauz-Mozer, who influenced successive generations of Polish political scientists: “In political science, the strategies of social research and humanities research are permanently intertwined, overlapping each other; they are discernible, but it is impossible to separate them” (2013, p. 55). There is also general agreement that political scientists who use the hermeneutic methods appropriate to the humanities have a unique position in the political science discipline. Furthermore, the researchers agree that political science is developed at the intersection of the two fields, the humanities and social sciences. For the sake of the discipline’s advancement, one should avoid amputation of one of these fields. Administrative purists have a problem with this, however. Political science was sometimes administratively categorised in Poland as a humanities field and, other times – as it is currently – as a social sciences field.

Another dilemma concerns the methodological identity of political sciences and administration. Does the discipline of political sciences have an identity of its own, separate from other disciplines such as sociology, law, economics, history, and philosophy, or does its identity lie within a given scientific field, the field of social sciences or the joint field of humanities and social sciences? To quote Zbigniew Blok:

Political scientists, with few exceptions, have admitted that their discipline does not have a methodological identity, for an object-methodological distinctiveness belongs to the level of fields of science, and that the humanistic interpretation is a peculiar method of human sciences. It consists in explaining human actions and their results by referring to the goals of acting actors and their knowledge indicating what means are effective in achieving these goals (Blok, 2017a, p. 100).

The methodological and object identity of political science is advocated by a small number of representatives of the discipline, such as Andrzej J. Chodubski, Jerzy Muszyński and Ryszard Skarzyński (Blok, 2017b, p. 25; see: Chodubski, 2004; Muszyński, 2007; Skarzyński, 2014).

Klementewicz, on the other hand, is in favour of a broad, field-based approach to the object of the discipline. The research interest of a political scientist should encompass the relationship between the state and the economy (i.e., political economy) and not be fragmented “into separate plots, well fenced off from neighbouring specialities (political systems, political thought, international relations, political marketing, geopolitics, etc.)” (Klementewicz, 2017, p. 45).

Blok argues that there has never been “any doubt raised about the fact that it [political science] is a social science and what the research implications are” (Blok, 2017a, p. 101). However, the specificity of political science as a social science (i.e., referring to the study of human actions within society) is that it belongs to two fields – social sciences and the humanities.

Another dilemma concerns the research object of politics. Is politics confined to the realm of the state, or is it an all-pervasive phenomenon? During the communist period in the 1970s and 1980s, the object of the discipline was the state. This was because it was assumed that politics was where the state was. Artur Bodnar, one of the most prominent political scientists of the time, had a significant impact on this development (Góra-Szopiński, 2015, pp. 22–24).

After the political transformation of 1989, within the newly established democratic system, there was a change in the perception of the boundaries of the existence of politics. Wojciech Łukowski argues that Polish political science is characterised by the “late comer syndrome”, i.e., not going through all the stages of development “through which political science in Western democracies had gone because we were not a democratic Western country” (Łukowski, 2018, p. 210). Łukasz Młyńczyk confirms this, noting Polish political science’s attempt to become autonomous through original research:

[...] the strength of Polish political science remains keeping the right balance between what we research and how we can carry it out. In this respect, contemporary Polish political theorists and methodological specialists are increasingly becoming not only continuators of the directions and schools existing in global political science but are also trying to present completely new approaches and ways of research (Młyńczyk, 2013, p. 9).

According to Łukowski, Polish political science is also characterised by “path dependence”, meaning “the logic of using the resources developed in the People’s Republic of Poland in the transformation taking place in a neo-liberal spirit and assuming the form of clientelistic democracy at a deeper level” (Łukowski, 2018, p. 211). Barbara Krauz-Mozer and Paweł Ścigaj emphasise that extending the boundaries of politics beyond government institutions and public authority leads to a paradoxical situation in which “the politics itself seems vague and unclear. The same can be said of its definition” (2013b, p. 11). What follows is a differentiation between politics in the direct and indirect sense. It is possible to distinguish politics in a strict and direct sense from that which has political importance since politics as a particular phenomenon is present in all expressions of social life. An example of tracking all manifestations of the political can be found in the works of Andrzej Czajowski, who distinguishes three fields of reference to the political – namely, the non-political field, the quasi-political field and the political field (2015, pp. 97–118). Mirosław Karwat, on the other hand, distinguishes four planes of research in theory of politics: meta-knowledge, essence, form and pragmatics. He claims that the scientific study of politics “[...] requires reaching the mechanisms, patterns [...]. However, the adequacy of attempts to systematise the mechanisms of political life requires placing them in their proper context, while the integrity and completeness of the picture of these mechanisms – the gradation of research (and continuity in it) on the four mentioned planes” (Karwat, 2013, p. 72). Another group of researchers, such as Marzukiewicz, Gierycz and Węgrzecki, take personalistic political anthropology as a criterion for distinguishing politics and metapolitics. This enables the distinction between direct political participation and engagement that may begin as non-political but later acquires such a character. This concerns values such as life, for example, which – though non-political in its nature – takes on a political meaning once politicisation extends to the realm of values.

Another dilemma concerns the division between empirical science and theoretical science. Social sciences take on some form of empirical science while simultaneously being a theoretical science. Priority is given to theory, and empirical research is conducted within the framework of a particular theory. Because not the whole politics but just a specific segment is examined, many theories emerge closely associated with this segment. Consequently, we are instead dealing not with one theory of politics, but with many political theories (Krauz-Mozer, 2005). The predominance of the theoretical side over the empirical leads

to the demand that the latter should be more appreciated. According to Łukasz Wordliczek, Polish political science needs a quantitative approach. He argues that “this obviousness [of this statement] may not seem so, given the modesty of the output of domestic political in this regard” (Wordliczek, 2013, p. 432).

This leads to another methodological dilemma: are grand theories being formulated within the political sciences? For the most part, political scientists shy away from formulating a grand theory. At most, having borrowed it from other disciplines, they limit themselves to creatively adapting a grand theory in order to formulate a small- or medium-range theory. Karwat’s theories serve as an example of this (2011, 2014). This inclination of political scientists to formulate theories rather smaller in scope is emphasised by Andrzej Jabłoński. When it comes to the study of processes of political change, political science “has the ambition to generalise and explain political processes by building models and scientific theories” (Jabłoński, 2013, p. 90). Blok expresses a similar opinion about the theoretical state of political science in Poland. He argues that “political science, at least at this stage of development, is not capable of producing a theory in the sense of a logically coherent set of scientific laws, deductively systematised according to the pattern of an axiomatized system, nor even a theory in the form of a set of interrelated assertions that make it possible to systematise knowledge about social life, to explain it and predict its future, and to put forward its own research hypotheses” (Blok, 2013, p. 277). Political science, in the sense of “*the theoretical knowledge of politics* or, alternatively, *theoretical political science* in regard to theory is situated closer to hermeneutics – whose purpose is to teach *understanding* and *interpretation*” (Blok, 2013, p. 277).

Another dilemma has to do with the scientificity of political sciences. Are they empirical, pragmatic or theoretical? Politics is a complex research object addressed by the humanities and social sciences disciplines. As a stand-alone discipline, political sciences are more of a platform on which specific sub-disciplines meet. Some sub-disciplines conduct empirical research (political system and political behaviour), others pragmatic (communication and political marketing) and, finally, others theoretical (philosophy and theory of politics). In general, it can be argued that within political sciences several types of scientificity have been developed, depending in practice on the researcher’s chosen area of expertise.

The above differentiation of scientificity is linked to the functions of science: descriptive, explanatory, predictive, instrumental, and axiological (ideological). In the field of political sciences, this manifests itself in a dilemma concerning the axiological neutrality of practical knowledge. Is the object practical but the knowledge about it theoretical? Is not only the object itself, but also knowledge about it (derived from political science) practical? In the second case, political science would not be intrinsically neutral knowledge in relation to the observed social practice. Political science would, inevitably, become an element of



the political process as an instrumental and axiological (ideological) function would be woven into it.

A dilemma that affects the methodological identity of the discipline of political sciences is the process of separation of sub-disciplines. The picture is fluid because new ones such as security, social communication or political science of religion are emerging. The separation of the latter is advocated by Mazurkiewicz. It is argued that the recognition of religion as an enduring phenomenon in the history of civilisation raises questions characteristic of or appropriate to political science: “what religion exactly is and what differentiates individual historical religions in a meaningful way [...] and whether a functional approach to religion in political sciences can be deemed sufficient”, the latter Mazurkiewicz proposes to replace with a semi-substantive approach. “It requires the political scientist to become familiar with the substance of a particular religion and to try to understand to what extent certain social consequences of a particular religious belief (e.g., polygamy, religiously motivated violence, separation of religion and politics) are related to its essence and to what extent they are only accidentally related” (Mazurkiewicz, 2019, p. 11). A similar position is occupied by Gierycz, who advocates the need to overcome reductionism within the framework of a deep systemic analysis in the political science of religion (Gierycz, 2019, p. 41), or Dariusz Góra-Szopiński, who advocates a neutral but sympathetic position towards the research object which should take into account the personalistic dimension of religion, with the aim of research becoming the understanding of the relationship between religion and politics (Góra-Szopiński, 2015, pp. 29–30).

Other sub-disciplines with well-established statutes strive for independence. Administratively, international relations were recognised as a separate scientific discipline in Poland in 2022. In conclusion, rightly according to Blok,

Tadeusz Klementewicz reduces the methodological problems of political science to taking into account the knowledge accumulated by both the various political science sub-disciplines and the other social sciences, and to skilfully combining the external conditions of action with the agency of people, which is determined by knowledge of conditions and professed values (Blok, 2017a, p. 101; see: Klementewicz, 2014, p. 273).

Another dilemma concerns political anthropology, agency, and the relationship between the individual and social groups. It, therefore, concerns the vision of the human being and their relation to the community. The dispute over the understanding of a human being arises from the chosen political anthropology – which is, in turn, formulated based on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological stances. The dispute over agency leads to two positions: individualism and holism. Do only individuals exist and act, or do social groups also exist and act independently? Methodological individualism takes the view that



only individuals act. Methodological holism assumes that collective groups, and not only individuals, are actors. Can the behaviour of individuals be explained solely by their characteristics or rather by the specific nature of the group to which they belong? The argument about agency hinges on resolving the relationship between the actor and the social structure. Once it is done, it is possible to answer the question of what guides people's behaviour: is it beliefs (i.e., ideas, norms, and values) or egoistic interests resulting from group membership? It is a trait of Polish political scientists to strive to overcome emerging dichotomies. Personalists acknowledge that relational structures including ethical, cultural, and social institutions have an impact on how people act. Proponents of holism appreciate then the role of the individual to the extent that effectively preaches personalistic holism.

The last dilemma concerns the dispute over value judgements, the axiological neutrality of the researcher and the functions of science, including ideological functions. The dispute over rationality, over scientificity, also includes a dispute over values. Political scientists cite the solutions of Max Weber, Karol Marx (historical materialism), Wilhelm Dilthey and Eric Voegelin. The dilemma lies in the relationship between facts and value judgements. It takes on particular significance concerning the political science researcher when we ask about the researcher's axiological neutrality. According to Klementewicz, the "ideological-axiological identifications of the researcher" (2017, p. 38) play an important role. Research is a process of furthering specific group interests, such as the ethno-cultural community, neoliberal shareholder capitalism, or the working classes' need for emancipation and social advancement. Cognition is never axiologically neutral. The political scientist supports solutions and legitimises the rationality of change at the particularistic level indicated above, "at the level of the society as a whole" and at the level of planetary rationality (Klementewicz, 2017, p. 48). Lech Rubisz takes a similar but somewhat toned-down position: "neutrality is a certain ideal to which the researcher of social reality should constantly strive despite the undeniable, subjective and objective limitations standing in the way – and further: these limitations, unavoidable in the process of cognition, do not eliminate the possibility of objectivizing the result" (Rubisz, 2013, p. 183). The above standpoint qualifies as fairly widely accepted, regardless of the ontological option one might adopt.

The issue of values is dealt with differently in the two dominant methodological models of political sciences development, namely positivism and hermeneutics. The issue is then moved to the level of explaining political behaviour. A causal explanation on the one hand and one that represents understanding on the other. Hermeneutic understanding corresponds to explanation in the natural sciences. It involves using the external signs to reach social actors' insides, their motives, goals, aspirations, attitudes, and values. Furthermore, this understanding-based cognition is subject to interpretation. Juxtaposing hermeneutics

and positivism lead to the dilemma of ‘deduction’ versus ‘induction’. Blok correctly argues that:

Human actions are difficult to explain by means of a cause-and-effect scheme because they are always intentional and cannot be reduced to natural regularities and patterns. They are conscious and deliberate [...] culturally determined, and therefore neither description nor causal explanation is sufficient to comprehend them – what is necessary is an understanding that shows the meaning of the behaviour. The cultural context of people’s actions links them with values, with all the consequences this entails. Thus, in the humanities (social sciences), there is no reason to treat *explanation* and *understanding* as two alternatives (Blok, 2017b, p. 30).

## Summary

As one can easily see, we have been observing a constant strive to transcend the dichotomies discussed above. Searching for a solution between and beyond the opposing elements, trying to combine them and giving them a new but not eclectic form has been a recognisable feature of Polish political science in the past half-century. The position advocated by Artur Laska can be considered typical, at least in its declarative layer, for Polish political science of the last 50 years. Indeed, one can hardly disagree with Laska’s claim that: “the rejection of thinking in terms of the identified alternatives in favour of complementarity does not imply their synthetic overcoming since, by their very nature, they are complementary orders, not antagonistic ones” (Laska, 2017, pp. 33–34). Polish political scientists try to avoid one-sided solutions, striving to take into account the entire complexity of the aspects of politics under study. As such, complementarity is the answer to the methodological dilemmas that arise.

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