

Political Scientists as Public Intellectuals: Sofia Ventura

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IPS: You are a scholar that is also an active participant in public and political debates through commentaries in radio and TV programs. Is your public engagement a result of fortuitous circumstances or something that you deliberately chose to do?

I would say that it is the result of a great interest I have always had for politics, which is the main thing that led me to choose political science as a graduate student. It is the same interest that led me to take part in the *Gioventù Liberale* and to build political connections over time. When you are intensively interested in an area, it is almost inevitable that you will end up working in it.

IPS: Do you think it is possible to keep academic knowledge apart from personal preferences and political inclinations? And does it make sense to keep them separate?

This is the problem for all scholars that want to engage and shape the public debate. What I mean is that, in principle, it is possible to be “objective” based on the technical knowledge that derives from academic work. However, the danger is always looming that we will use the same knowledge for serving the political convenience or political sympathy of the time. This risk gets magnified when vanity kicks in the motivations that lead scholars in the public arena.

IPS: Basically we run the risk of quickly turning from useful to dysfunctional participants in the public debate?

I think it is important to remember that our science is not an exact science. As a result, if we want to be “correct” we should not liken our knowledge to a mathematical equation. What we can say is that our knowledge leads us to make probabilistic conclusions about political phenomena. The problem arises when we try to elevate our knowledge to some kind of universal truth. When this happens, I think that our value to the public debate significantly diminishes.

IPS: Well, let’s assume a “benevolent” scenario where scholars engage with public debates with the aim of contributing to improve them. What are the most important contributions that political scientists can bring to the table?

I think that political scientists can really provide a useful contribution in a number of important respects. First, we can improve public understanding of the complexities that characterize political and social phenomena. Specifically, we can bring in a systemic approach that helps shed light on the interconnections among the various parts of the political and social system and how change in one part affects the others. Second, political scientists can alert the public and policymakers about the risk of unintended consequences that stem from political and constitutional choices. Third, political scientists have a lot to say about the impact of public policies—and this is a key contribution.

In doing that, political scientists can be of help in fostering a more informed public debate, especially at a time in which such a debate is particularly poor (probably not *just* in Italy, but particularly so in our country). Our methodological toolkit is also important here. For instance, when I write for newspapers or participate in TV programs—and at risk of appearing boring—I adopt the methodological tools that come from the study of political science. I can give you an example that builds from my work on political narratives. As public debate is replete with narratives, what I try to do in my public appearances is to show that these narratives are far from providing causal explanations and that more attention should be devoted to clearly establishing lines of causation when explaining political outcomes.

IPS: Until now we have been discussing the contributions of political science to public and political debates. What about the other line of causation? In what respect does public involvement improve academic work and how?

Well, the first answer is that public engagement drains off a lot of resources from academic work! In general, however, more than improving academic work, public engagement with the world we study provides a deeper knowledge of it. Then, of course, it very much depends on the research object. In my case, being immersed in a network of people that makes the political communication is of great advantage as I get close to the object of study. In a certain sense, it is a kind of participatory observation.

IPS: What is your take on the relevance of political scientists to the public debate? Do you think that public engagement is a recipe for relevance or not?

Yes, I think it is. Of course, getting outside a university class to the public debate requires personal inclinations and not all academics might be willing to do that. Yet it is necessary to exit from our offices to comment in a newspaper at least. It is also necessary to bear in mind that when we address non-academic communities, it is of

utmost importance to use different linguistic codes' and make the results of our research appealing and accessible. Moreover, this, of course, requires a lot of effort.

IPS: What about our relationship with policymakers and their choices? Are we able to be heard, particularly as compared to academics working in other fields as lawyers or economists?

A general problem in our country is that politics tends to rely on political scientists, economists or lawyers only at the point in which political choices need to be legitimized. Policymakers do make a selective use of technical competences. In other words, they approach us already with an idea of what they want to do rather than with the question of how to reach a specific goal.

Having said that, for political scientists the other challenge is that we cannot provide policymakers with definitive answers on the courses of action they want to pursue. Furthermore, we find ourselves operating in a cultural tradition that attributes lawyers' pride of place in the management of "cosa pubblica".

IPS: A not too favorable environment to get a hearing, right?

Yes, but the problems are also of our making. For instance, our quest for specialization risks denting the very contributions we can make to public and political debate. As the doctor that knows everything about one part of the body is not necessarily able to cure a fever, so an excessively specialized political science risks losing understanding about how political systems operate.