

Doing Political Science on the Eve of Destruction: Why I Decided to Leave Academia

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Abstract

The current human condition knows no precedent. Our species' history is replete with societies crumbling and ecosystems collapsing. But never before has human existence itself been this clearly on the eve of destruction. What does this mean for political science? In this piece, I argue why now more than ever political scientists ought to reflect on the question how they are to spend the 80,000 hours of their careers and explain my own choice to quit academia and do political science outside of the university.

Keywords: climate change, ecological crisis, political science profession.

The current human condition knows no precedent. Our species' history is replete with societies crumbling and ecosystems collapsing. But never before has human existence itself been this clearly 'on the eve of destruction', as Barry McGuire might put it. The growing strain on the possibility of human (and non-human!) life on our planet due to ecological degradation and climate change poses a fundamental challenge to how we have arranged our societies, politics and daily lives. Clearly, things need to change if we still want there to be a place for *Homo sapiens* and a host of other species on planet earth in the not-so-distant future. This was the backdrop against which I decided to quit academia – because I wanted to, not because I had to.

1 80,000 Hours

A big chunk of our lives is dedicated to our professional careers –some say as many as 80,000 hours.¹ What should we do with all that 'contracted time', as time-use researchers call it? *What kind* of work should we be doing and *how* should we spend our time on the job? These are vital questions not only because all those hours spent at work shape the rest of our own and other people's lives but also because there seems to be only limited time left to turn the tide and fundamentally reshape our societies to avert further ecological and climate disaster.

I do not see why political scientists would be exempt from regularly confronting themselves with the deeply ethical and personal question of what they should do with some 80,000 hours. Perhaps they should even be particularly concerned by it,

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as it is arguably their task to help people understand the political and social challenges humanity is facing and to come up with potential solutions. That being my own conviction, I struggled with this question for quite some time and more and more so as my PhD journey was drawing to a close.

2 Between Lifeworld and System

But this is not just about me. For any political scientist, the question soon becomes: what should I be doing at *university*, and should I be doing that in an academic environment at all? That depends on one's view of academia.

On the one hand, I have always viewed the university as a place very much akin to what Habermasians might call the *lifeworld*; a place of free-floating ideas and reflection, well-suited for understanding our present condition and for coming up with the blueprints of tomorrow's societies. Whereas in other places in our Western societies there is often little time for thorough reflection (Ercan et al., 2019), the university is an exceptional environment in that it offers the potential for generating radically new ideas and ways of understanding.

On the other hand, the university, as I know it, has also been usurped for a large part by the *system* (to stick to Habermasian terminology). And that system is of course a *capitalist* system. Its 'colonising' of the university is perhaps most clearly visible in pressures to attract research grants and students to remain 'profitable' and in mounting competition for academic positions. Even though the system's functioning depends heavily on innovations coming from places like the university, it thus also creates the kind of perverse incentives that undermine the workings of the university on which it so much depends, for example, through temporary working conditions and publication targets. As Nancy Fraser (2022) might put it, the capitalist system is devouring the university and thereby some of the very conditions on which it depends for its own functioning.

Certainly, I am simplifying things here, not in the last place by talking about 'the university' in the singular. Yet, I feel that most political scientists will quite easily recognise this tension between the lifeworld-like ideal of a university and the imperatives imposed by the capitalist system. It is the latter that has played an important part in pushing me away from university. But why leave? Is it not the responsibility of a political scientist to change the university from within, carving out spaces in which critical reflection and radical reimagination can flourish and, ultimately, halting the colonisation of the university by the system?

4 Playing the Academic Game

Let me first say that my workplace over the past years in many ways did come close to the lifeworld-like image of the university. Yet, staying at the university would mean leaving that niche and building a career in the wider world of academia. That would inevitably involve devoting a substantial amount of time and energy to the standard operations of an academic today: teaching, writing grant proposals, and doing peer-reviewed research. Now, I quite enjoy all of those 'operations', or in

Ramon van der Does

gaming language, the ‘core mechanics’ of academia, that is, “the basic actions that players perform again and again” (Lerner, 2014, p. 74). What I was afraid of is getting lost in the game and losing sight of why I would want to keep playing it: trying to help understand and address the pending ecological crises (in my case, from the perspective of political science).

In my experience, it is easy to get drawn away from such an objective when most of the routines are aimed at keeping the institution operating according to the system’s imperatives rather than at addressing societal challenges per se. For example, as peer-reviewed publications continue to be viewed as the prime “points” or “status indicators” (cf. Lerner, 2014) in the academic game, it seems difficult to devote a substantial portion of one’s time to writing for policymakers or the wider public. If one can stay in academia (and that is by no means guaranteed), the easier option is to just stick to academic publishing and earn the kind of points that will lead to rewards in the academic game. This puts a clear strain on translating academic insights into practical and accessible advice for real-world change. After all, we only have so many hours to spend during our careers.

The space and time required for undertaking such activities in the margin of the academic game would become even more limited, I imagined, were I also to attempt to incrementally change the university from within, trying to alter the ‘rules of the game’, so to speak. There is most certainly a place for that, and I applaud all those engaged in fighting for a more lifeworld-like university! Nevertheless, to me, staying in academia to both make it more directly relevant to addressing societal challenges *and* inform public debate by translating peer-reviewed research into practical advice seemed like an unnecessarily complicated and indirect way of trying to attain my objectives. If my professional goal is to inform public debate and policy in an accessible fashion about how we can understand and address the pending ecological crises from the perspective of political science, then would it not make more sense to focus on that *directly*, without being held back by the aforementioned logics and system imperatives plaguing the academy?

5 Doing Political Science in a Limited World

In many ways, entertaining such questions is most definitely a luxury, something that only makes sense if the political scientist can cut their ties with academia and still survive in a capitalist society. But for those who have the means and opportunity to do so, the current human condition, in my view, makes it necessary for them to consider whether their time and energy is best spent within the walls of universities. If there are more direct and effective ways of turning sound research into practical use to help humanity redirect its politics and societies in a more sustainable direction, political scientists ought to change their ways accordingly.

In a limitless world, we could easily study any question purely out of academic interest. Unfortunately, that is not the world we live in. The world we live in is biting back at humanity for exceeding “the limits to growth” (Meadows et al., 1972) and is demanding new ways of social and political organisation to bring the world back into balance. Many times, then, I have not only wondered whether *I* should

leave the university; I have also frequently wondered whether others too *would* and *should* do political science outside of the academy. What would that mean for the role that political scientists would play in our societies? And what would that mean for how well we could address the political challenges ahead?

Note

- 1 For a similar reflection in relation to democratic theory, see van der Does (2022).

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