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## History and Dissent: Bernard Crick's *The American Science of Politics*

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**T**his article revisits the critique of political science outlined in Bernard Crick's (1959) *The American Science of Politics*. Although this work inspired a number of subsequent critics of the discipline and survives in the footnotes of many historical accounts of political science, its contents are now largely overlooked or forgotten. Having reconstructed its main arguments, I explore the mixed critical response this work elicited on publication, and then seek to explain why its influence was so short-lived. An important reason for its inability to deflect the discipline from its chosen course lies in the very distinctive republican-liberal project that guided Crick's thinking in these years. A critical reengagement with this text is worthwhile, I argue, both because it illustrates the importance of the migration of ideas and thinkers to the tradition of political science critique, and because Crick provides a strikingly different kind of argument for methodological pluralism and political relevance than that which is offered today by critics of political science.

**T**he development of a scholarly subfield devoted to the history of political science has been an important, if largely unheralded, accompaniment to the discipline's professional and intellectual development (Farr 1988). Though small in size, the influence of this body of work has occasionally been quite considerable as it has stimulated debates about the identity, rationale, and boundaries of the subject (Almond 1988; Dryzek, Farr and Leonard 1988, 1–4; Farr and Seidelman 1993, 1–11). Those historically minded scholars who have adopted a broadly critical attitude toward the development and character of political science have made important, and necessarily contentious, contributions to the disciplinary field as a whole.

In this article I revisit one of the main textual precursors of this scholarly genre—Bernard Crick's *The American Science of Politics* (1959). Widely cited as one of the founding works of the subject's historiography, *The American Science* enjoys a rather ambiguous status within American political science. It survives largely through citations in the footnotes of later historians for whom it has become an almost totemic reference point in the development of the discipline-history of political science. Yet it is very rarely read or seriously engaged today, and is barely known among political scientists at large.<sup>1</sup> In the first part of this article, therefore, I set out the main arguments of *The American Science* and discuss the character of the response it elicited following its publication. I then reconstruct the broader normative perspective from within which this particular work emerged. Much of the intellectual agenda that informed Crick's thinking has, I suggest, disappeared from view within the contemporary disciplinary field. The book's critique of the American profession was founded on a set of normative convictions—about the nature of politics, the value of civic education, and the uniquely American character of political science—that

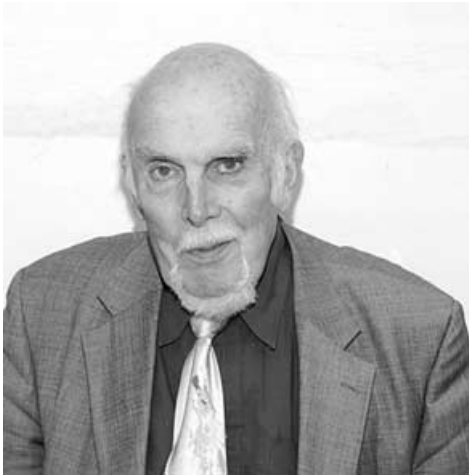
are largely unfamiliar to the mindset of the discipline today. Toward the end of this article, I suggest that some of the positions that Crick sketched in *The American Science* deserve reengagement, in part to improve political science critics' awareness of the development over time of a rich lineage of disciplinary critique. The latter has grounded its criticisms and counter-assertions on a much wider array of epistemological, normative, and political claims than those advanced by more recent critics. Engagement with this tradition, including works such as Crick's, might well enhance the caliber and reflexivity of the arguments mounted by today's political science reformers. They might also gain from learning that a vital dimension of the tradition of political science critique has arisen from the ongoing migration of ideas, intellectuals, and texts among the United States, Britain, and Continental Europe.

### AUTHOR, ARGUMENTS, AND IMPACT

From across the Atlantic, *The American Science* tends to be viewed as the quintessential expression of an abidingly empiricist English mentality, which has been identified by some critics as a major obstacle to the development of a modern discipline of political science in Britain (Hayward 1991). A closer inspection of its main lines of argument, and the eclectic set of intellectual influences that it exhibited, reveals such a characterization to be misleading. The kaleidoscope of ideas that the book brought together had its roots in the medley of theories and minds that Crick encountered during his years as an undergraduate student at the London School of Economics (LSE). Founded in 1895 by the moderate socialists gathered around the influential Fabian Society, LSE was home to an unusually wide (in British terms) array of ideological and philosophical perspectives, encompassing Karl Popper, Friedrich von Hayek, and Michael Oakeshott in the years when Crick studied there (Dahrendorf 1995). The unusual fusion of styles of argument located in *The American Science*—with historical, philosophical, Mannheimian, and ideological idioms bumping against

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<sup>1</sup> For a notable exception see Gunnell 2004.

**FIGURE 1. Bernard Crick**

Courtesy of Bernard Crick.

each other—reflects this diversity, as well as Crick’s facility for creative intellectual synthesis.<sup>2</sup>

If this work is read alongside a bevy of scholarly and journalistic publications that he authored from the mid-1950s (Crick 1954a, 1954b, 1961, 1962), it becomes clear that Crick’s position was neither straightforwardly anti-American nor antipolitical science, as his interpreters have assumed. He was a keen student of American history and wrote admiringly of some of the major figures of the Founding era (1961). In terms of political science, he penned several influential essays on the nature of political scholarship and its importance as a University-level subject (1971, 1980a, 1980b). American thinking about politics filtered into his own educational experiences in different ways. Some of the competing ideas about the study of society, and political science especially, which he encountered at LSE, reflected the percolation of political science into some of the leading British universities in the 1950s (Kenny 2006). Crick was well versed in the work of some of the LSE’s former and contemporary luminaries, several of whom had made important contributions to debates about politics, the state, and political analysis within the American profession. This group included Graham Wallas, the first Director of the LSE and one of the major early twentieth-century figures to ground theoretical claims about politics on the “facts” of human psychology (Wiener 1991). Crick was familiar, too, with the thinking about associations, statehood, and the political outlined in the popular lectures delivered by the emigré socialist intellectual Harold Laski at LSE (Crick 1989). The latter’s travels to the United States played a major role in bringing pluralism to the fore in American political thought in the early decades of

the twentieth century (Gunnell 2006). Crick himself embarked on his doctoral studies intending to produce a thesis that sounded impeccably Chicago-esque: “The Method and Scope of Political Science: The Problem of the Integration of Empirical Social Research into the Study of Politics” (Crick 1980, 297–98). As is often the case with talented and zealous graduate students, he encountered a crisis of faith soon afterwards, and subsequently abandoned this project.

These different influences are apparent within the main lines of argument that Crick developed in his doctoral thesis and the book he published three years later.<sup>3</sup> The aspiration to establish a science of politics along the lines associated with natural-scientific models of inquiry, he maintained, was in key respects a uniquely American enterprise. He enthusiastically set about the task of laying bare the ideologically formed premises informing the writing of some of the major figures of the political science tradition (Charles Merriam and Harold Lasswell most prominently). Although his general argument about the origins and development of the social sciences was by no means original in this period, *The American Science* must have struck its American readers as unusual in some important respects. Its author’s selection of pivotal figures in the political science tradition remained largely unjustified, and seemed quirky to many contemporaries (see, e.g., Scanlan 1961, 210). And the particular hostility that Crick evinced for the political implications of the work of some of his main targets was far from conventional in a work of this kind.

In thesis and book Crick identified a set of interlocking values that together gave shape to the “Lockean unanimity” that, he argued, came to define Americanism itself in the decades after the founding of the republic (1959, 8–11). The idea that politics should be taught and studied as an independent subject within universities had from the outset been conjoined with the notion that it ought to serve the republic in molding the consciousness of American citizens, particularly in the context of successive and ongoing waves of immigration. Relatedly, the notion that social and political phenomena could be understood on a par with the natural world was underpinned by some deeply rooted liberal assumptions about politics, nationhood, and morality. Out of this *mélange* developed the peculiarly American notion that the academic discipline of politics could and should serve two masters equally—the requirements of a constitutional democracy and the aspiration to scientific explanation. The celebration of science in nineteenth-century liberal thought reflected a powerful fetish for technology and an understanding of societal progress imagined as the fulfillment of America’s manifest destiny (37–48). Both of these presumptions, Crick maintained, were protected by the depth and breadth of the prevailing liberal pattern of thinking, which rendered unnecessary the reexamination of

<sup>2</sup> As well as the books discussed here, Crick is best known in the UK for his major biography of George Orwell (1980b) and numerous essays on many different themes, including nationalism, citizenship, politics and literature, and political education (or for instance: Crick 2000).

<sup>3</sup> His doctoral thesis was supervised by the political historian Kingsley Bryce Smellie and was successfully submitted to the University of London in 1958 with the title “The Origins and Conditions of the American Science of Politics.”

fundamental political arrangements and foundational values.

Crick was by no means alone in attempting to attack the encroachment of scientism in social and political research in this period. *The American Science* was published at the very moment when “behaviorism” was beginning to gather momentum in the United States, and gave a temporary focus and voice to a number of the discontents and resentments welling up within the American profession in response to this emergent current (e.g., Cook 1960; Monypenny 1960). The latter formed a crucial backdrop to the formation of the Caucus for a New Political Science a decade later. Crick undoubtedly anticipated the sharp turn against some of the precepts and implications of a liberal-inclined political science that characterized this critical current in the late 1960s, although his take on liberalism was very different from that of later critics. In his argument, liberal political science and paradigms like Marxism were equally deficient because of their tendency to treat the domain of politics as comprehensible in respect to social processes, laws, or facts of human psychology that emanated from outside it. Against such meta-assumptions, he countered that there were no adequate underlying explanations or noncontradictory resolutions of the conflicts that human society engenders. Ideological perspectives founded on the illusion that there were, brought a dangerous impatience with politics in their wake. Even avowedly liberal approaches to politics, therefore, could unwittingly prepare the way for authoritarian policy outcomes (Crick 1959, 213–48; 1954a). Although his thinking may have anticipated aspects of the agenda of the Caucus, it is important to appreciate that it did not itself constitute a direct influence on most Caucus participants. The anger and energy of reform-minded political scientists of this later period stemmed from the impact of forces such as the women’s movement, civil rights, debates about social inequality, and the moral fallout from the Vietnam war, not the historically inclined republicanism favored by Crick.

At this time of its publication, however, *The American Science* created a stir. Indeed, few first books by junior British scholars have achieved the kind of profile that it briefly enjoyed. Reviewed in most of the main journals, it received some sharply critical responses and outright hostility, as well as words of praise and approval. Among the most perceptive of the first wave of critical responses were the objections offered by the English-educated scholar George Catlin (1960), a leading advocate of “a conception of a rigorous science of politics dedicated to an end in action” (Gunnell 2005, 599). He queried Crick’s reliance on simplified caricatures of national intellectual traditions and his inability to capture the mobility and interactivity of ideas and intellectuals in Anglo-American political science. Other reviewers were less polite than Catlin in expressing their dislike for the polemical, occasionally *ad hominem*, character of Crick’s commentary (Garceau 1959). Yet the very acidity that infused some of Crick’s discussion of the normative importance and liberal character of the aspiration to establish a science of politics as a value-free mode of enquiry constituted

a major part of the book’s appeal in some quarters. Viewed from a more distant temporal vantage point, it is clear that his trenchantly critical focus helped establish this book as an important source of inspiration for a subsequent strand of critically minded disciplinary historiography.

## CRICK AND THE POLITICAL

*The American Science* has therefore come to occupy a curious place within the collective memory of the discipline. It remains an almost ubiquitous presence within the footnotes of disciplinary historians and clearly inspired some later writers (e.g., Ricci 1984). Yet it has left little by way of a lasting intellectual imprint on disciplinary critics, right up to and including the recent Perestroika current, and it exercises little substantive influence over contemporary historians of the discipline.<sup>4</sup> Aside from the eclecticism of Crick’s approach and the acerbic nature of some of his rhetoric, the main explanation for the predominantly short-lived impact of the book lies in the distinctive nature of Crick’s intellectual focus in this period. Much of his work in the 1950s and 1960s was concerned with such issues as the moral responsibilities of political analysts in relation to public debate and their own ideological affiliations, and how best to remedy the loss of purpose and public influence associated with the demise of the commitment to the promotion of civic education, which had once been so important to the discipline. Three decades before debates about the distinctive properties of “the political” returned to the forefront of Anglo-American political theorizing, he also insisted on the foundational significance of theoretical engagement with ideas about the nature, boundaries, and purposes of politics itself to its teaching and study as a university subject.

Crick provided the fullest elaboration of his thinking on these themes in the book he published several years after *The American Science*—his best-selling *In Defence of Politics* (1973; first published 1962). This theoretically focused attempt to revive insights from the ancient and modern republican traditions in the context of a discussion of the trans-temporal characteristics of political communities established him as a major figure within political theory in Britain. Politics, he maintained, constituted both a particular mode of governance that had been adopted by only a portion of human communities, and a demarcated field of human endeavor—the processes and institutions through which the interests of members of the body politic were publicly aired and defended. The political mode of governance also represented a way of organizing social interrelations that taught citizens the impossibility of the simultaneous satisfaction of all of their interests. On this basis, he argued forcefully against two established tendencies in modern intellectual conceptions of politics: (1) the appeal of theoretical ideas that idealized the creation of some kind of nonpolitical consensus

<sup>4</sup> Neither author nor text is discussed (though both are once again referenced) in the contributions to a major recent collection of essays devoted to the Perestroika rebellion (Monroe 2005).

as a vantage-point from which social dysfunctions and political divisions might be objectively viewed and (2) the abandonment of the ancient notion that politics was intrinsically civilizing for those who participated fully within it (1973).

In relation to the first of these commitments, he maintained that human communities that chose to regulate their affairs through political systems, processes, and debate were far more likely to manage the unavoidably divergent interests and values of their members in sustainable and peaceful ways (Crick 1971, 1973). On this basis, he dismissed a host of contemporary ideological and philosophical attempts to erect and defend other *a priori* principles of political societies—especially theories founded on claims about the human personality, the merits of tradition, or the conditions appropriate to the exercise of rationality (all familiar parts of the Anglo-American theoretical scene in the 1950s). The recurrent dream of an escape from, or transcendence of, the political foundered on the ontological reality that humans possess a myriad of divergent interests and values that cannot be resolved through a higher order conception of rationality or interest. Without politics, there can be no “. . . order to the pluralism and variety of civilized society, the thing which enables us to enjoy variety without suffering either anarchy or the tyranny of single truths” (1973, 26).

It followed for Crick that a healthy civic culture and the provision of opportunities for individuals to act and deliberate as citizens were vital ingredients for a community committed to political modes of governance and self-regulation. Citizenship was enhanced, he believed, through the experiential learning of the values of compromise, moral independence, and the importance of securing provisional agreements on questions about which citizens disagreed fundamentally. The freedom of the individual in modern democracy was closely associated with the achievement of an independent public domain, where notions of the common good could be worked out by, and made binding on, all (1977).

Read retrospectively with this broader pattern of thinking in view, the main lines of argument of *The American Science* can be understood as flowing from an evolving republican–liberal sensibility. This informed many of Crick’s reflections on the appropriate nature of political inquiry and education more generally, and has continued to animate his later academic writings and more recent political career.<sup>5</sup> It was in relation to the inculcation of the various aptitudes required of modern citizens that he saw a unique role for the study and teaching of politics. His time in the United States bequeathed an important duality in his thinking about these questions. He echoed the contrast favored by some American republican theorists—between the

disappointing historical reality of a civic culture that instilled in citizens a broadly conservative understanding of the institutional structures and values identified as central to the republic and the unrealized republican yearning for the inculcation of the kinds of critical aptitude that would enable individuals to mature into independent citizens. A richer political education involved the communication of a sense of vocation and a set of moral and intellectual faculties, not the preparation of a class for a civics test. This distinction underlay his critical response to the ideal of citizenship that had been central to the public rhetoric of the American Political Science Association from its foundation (Crick 1956, 531–60). The latter reproduced the ossified rigidity of the liberal model of patriotism that Crick and other republicans repudiated. In Crick’s terms, this dominant conception precluded, rather than underpinned, individual freedom, as the latter required both a common cultural heritage and the freedom and capacity of citizens to debate and challenge its precepts.

These ideas about politics and democratic education shaped much of Crick’s thinking about the philosophical underpinnings and ideological character of the political science tradition, but have largely disappeared from the collective memory of the book. Ironically, Crick or his publishers bear some responsibility for this neglect. Its final text omitted only two sections from his doctoral thesis. One of these was the chapter on “Political Science and Citizenship” (1956, 531–60) in which he expressed this normative duality very clearly:

. . . the criticism should not be of citizenship training in general. . . . Nor of the ideal of a common education . . . But the criticism is leveled at what is now a tradition or a habit: the continuance of such indoctrination long after the ending of a mass immigration and the passing of a frontier. (1956, 535)

## AN ANGLO-AMERICAN CRITIC OF AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Viewed in the round, Crick’s thinking reflects a *mélange* of roots, influences, and resonances that obviate simplistic categorizations of the supposedly rival intellectual traditions located in England, Continental Europe, and the United States. As Catlin (1960) observed at the time of the book’s publication, and as more recent commentators have reiterated (Farr 2006), approaches to the history of political science that cling to such premises remain a major obstacle to improved understanding of the discipline’s intellectual history. Crick’s own thinking bears the particular imprint of the time he spent at two of the leading political science departments of the 1950s—Berkeley (where he was a Visiting Fellow, 1955–1956) and Harvard (where he was a Teaching Fellow, 1952–1954) (Gunnell 2004, 258). He was deeply influenced by the group of political theorists assembled around Norman Jacobson (1978) and Sheldon Wolin (1961) at the former, and the mode of “epic” political theorizing through

<sup>5</sup> Crick recently spent 3 years as an advisor to his former student David Blunkett when the latter served first as Minister for Education and then as Home Secretary in the Labour governments elected after 1997. He assumed a leading role in overseeing the introduction of courses on citizenship into secondary schools throughout the United Kingdom.

which they articulated important critiques of modern liberalism. Wolin was in this period refining the thinking that was to figure in his hugely influential account of the tradition of Western political philosophy, *Politics and Vision* (1961). At least two of the ideas at the heart of this study carried directly into Crick's work: Wolin's classically inspired conception of politics and citizenship as akin to a vocation, not a set of disembodied rights or mechanically acquired skills; and his critique of the tendency in Western philosophy to subsume politics underneath the tendrils of moral philosophy (287–94).

The author of *The American Science* also owed debts to the scholarly traditions associated with the kinds of historicopolitical theorizing practiced in some of the leading departments of the Northeast. Above all, he absorbed Louis Hartz's historical interpretation of American political development. *The American Science* faithfully reproduced the Hartzian picture of an American political culture distinguished by "the absence of serious ideological or class conflict and the presence of a fundamental agreement on values." Crick also followed Hartz and other "consensus theorists" in regarding "the social sciences themselves" as "important symptoms and causes of the fundamental agreement on basic political values associated with the hegemony of liberalism" (Huntington 1974, 2, 7).

Samuel Huntington (1974, 8) sheds light on another key source for Crick when he observes the paradigmatic impact of Tocqueville's writings on this generation of political historian. Tocqueville's writings on America form the backdrop to all of the pieces that Crick produced during his years in the United States (Crick 1963). He was deeply influenced by Tocqueville's sense of the dangers of a democratic order represented by the twin vices of social conformism and radical individualism. There is also a less tangible, and perhaps less conscious, sense in which Crick sought to emulate Tocqueville. He reveled in the role of traveling scholar-critic pioneered by the stream of intellectual visitors from Europe—Tocqueville included—who refined their own social and cultural thinking through commentary on American affairs (Liebersohn 1994). This tradition developed a particular tributary around the emergent discipline of political science, to which a number of British-based luminaries made important contributions—James Bryce, Wallas, Laski, and Catlin among others. The importance of the transactions, exchanges, disagreements, and forms of mutual learning occasioned by these intellectual migrants (as well as by a number of American scholars who visited and took up residence in Britain's political science community) has been somewhat eclipsed in the discipline's historiography by the more dramatic and contentious character of the German emigration of the inter-war years (Farr 2006). As various historians have observed, this ongoing pattern of Anglo-American intellectual interchange also forms a vital aspect of the development of ideas about the discipline in both contexts (Gunnell 2004; Kavanagh 2003). In Crick's case, the peculiar dialectic of distaste and admiration for American developments expressed by Tocqueville

and other European critics provides an important clue to the character of his own response to American political science and thought (Crick 1963).

## CONCLUSION

In terms of its sources, normative foundations, and historical character, Crick's critique of political science is substantively different from the arguments of most contemporary critics, though certain superficial resemblances are also apparent—a shared dismay at the lack of "relevance" of political science for politics itself and a preference for methodological pluralism. But these convictions emerged for Crick from an interpretative framework that remains rather challenging for today's political science critics for three main reasons. First, his argument reflected his commitment to the notion that political phenomena themselves and scholarly attempts to interpret them need to be grasped in their historical dimension. Given the largely ahistorical character of the arguments of today's political science critics and their apparent unfamiliarity with earlier moments of contention about the purpose and practice of the discipline, this difference assumes some significance. Second, Crick's position deserves reconsideration in part because it provides a quite different, and more skeptical, approach to the question of whether the discipline can become more relevant to public debate and policy formation while it continues to adhere to rationalistic, positivistic, and scientific modes of analysis. And third, *The American Science* deserves restitution as an unusual exemplar (and precursor) of a tradition of argument (associated today with the work of John Gunnell [1993] in particular), which identifies the institutionalized separation of political theory from the practice of political science as an important cause of intellectual limitation and frustration (Meilleur 2005).

These potential intellectual benefits undoubtedly need to be offset by a critical appreciation of the book's deficiencies as a work of disciplinary history. Aside from his sketchy account of the thinking of some of his intellectual quarries, Crick remained vague on the implications of his own position for politics as a university subject. What ought to be the constitutive core and appropriate boundaries of the discipline if it broke with scientism and positivism? And how should teachers of politics manage the inherent tensions between the civic-educative ambitions he advanced and the more specialist language and focus associated with the conceptually informed, inductive interpretive frameworks that he also advocated (Crick 1968)? Moreover, for an author who prided himself on his commitment to the importance of politics, Crick's account of figures like Merriam and Lasswell is notably devoid of attention to political context. Both they and other reform-minded political scientists were at times working against a backdrop of considerable ideological pressure, yet nowhere in his work do we find any account of how the adoption of the mantle of the neutral expert may have provided crucial political breathing space in both the 1920s and the decade after 1945. Given Crick's own moderate

socialist inclinations and his interest in the McCarthy hearings and the cultural impact of the Cold War, the absence of imaginative empathy he displayed in this regard is notable.<sup>6</sup>

Its flaws aside, a reengagement with *The American Science* might well encourage today's political scientists to confront from different angles some of the most difficult questions they face in the circumstances of the early twenty-first century. The question of whether a culture- and value-free political science is achievable or desirable remains the source of deep division across the constituent subfields of the profession. It has assumed added complexity and importance as American political science has been emulated and resisted in the many different countries where the discipline has become established since Crick's book was published. He himself favored the development of culturally diverse and nationally distinct *curricula* and modes of analysis, and remained committed to overturning the conviction that the American discipline constituted the "normal science" to which other scholarly communities should aspire. At its best, Crick's work points to the merits of adopting a less parochial approach to these questions.

Finally, despite its many unfamiliar aspects, one particular thread connects this text directly to the preoccupations of today's political science critics—a shared concern with the question of whether the discipline can engage meaningfully with political controversies of the day and speak to a public audience beyond the academy. Unlike most Perestroikans, Crick believed that a precondition of such a reengagement was a major reconceptualization of the subject's prevalent methodologies and theoretical paradigms and the abandonment of the epistemological claim to objectivity (though not necessarily impartiality [1971]) as the touchstone of disciplinary identity. But although he may have been more forceful and sweeping in his critique of political science than later critics, it is important to appreciate that Crick was not an inveterate opponent of the discipline. Some of the ambitions for the subject that he expressed suggest that, for all its quirks, *The American Science* remains resonant for scholars seeking to take the discipline forward between the *scylla* of its more schematic and rationalistic theoretical aspiration, and the *charybdis* of a skepticism that sees *only* ideological ambition in the attempt to develop a modern science of politics.

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<sup>6</sup> His disquiet with APSA's response to the McCarthy hearings was aired in several writings (e.g., Crick 1954, 8).

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