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The ability of political science to predict future developments

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Bonn, 4 July 2011. The revolutionary changes in the Arab world have recently reignited the debate on the ability of political science to predict the future. This applies in particular to the forecasting of trends and complex events in the countries of the South, whose significance for global policy and thus for Germany and Europe has greatly increased in the past decade. Clearly, it is widely thought, political science was not up to the task of predicting the protest and democracy movements in the Arab world. Similarly weak in the past, it seems, has been the political scientist's ability accurately to forecast, if not individual events, then at least incipient trends or their reversal.

The collapse of the Communist regime in the late 1980s is considered to be a prime example of this, but it is just one of many: in the mid-1970s Brazil was being referred to as one of tomorrow's world powers. Shortly afterwards it plunged into a debt crisis the impact of which severely restricted the country's international room for manoeuvre for the next twenty years. In the late 1980s Japan was proclaimed the new world power, only for its structural political and economic weaknesses to require this hypothesis to be adjusted but a short time later. In the early 1990s, against the backdrop of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Francis Fukuyama euphorically announced the end of history or the inevitable triumph of democracy. This, however, was soon followed by a period of disillusionment in view of the persistence of authoritarian structures in many countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Has, then, political science failed as regards its ability to develop viable forecasts of the future from findings on past events? A number of arguments can be advanced to refute so sweeping a generalisation:

Firstly, in some spheres of national policy analysis – especially electoral research – political science has developed considerable forecasting potential. Secondly, it cannot be predicted precisely when

such highly complex events as democratisation movements, revolutions and civil wars will occur. At best, probabilistic statements are possible, that is to say, statements on a certain level of the probability of political structures changing or enduring. At the same time, political scientists continue to differ widely in their opinions on what social and economic factors are relevant indicators of such phenomena and how individual factors should be weighted one against the other. However, this is not peculiar to political science. In modern economics, too, the causes of complex economic phenomena – such as debt or monetary crises – are still disputed, with the result that most forecasts published by economic advisory boards or commissions are worded in very general terms and extremely varied in their accuracy.

Yet it is true to say that political science faces particular challenges arising primarily from the absence of a uniform understanding of what it is. In Germany at least, there is anything but a consensus on what its tasks are, what skills it is seeking to acquire and what methods it should employ. Whether it should focus on explaining, describing or levelling normative criticism at political situations continues to be a controversial issue among its various schools of thought. This is especially true of the study of developing countries and regions, where representatives of modern branches of the social sciences, which place greater emphasis on explaining political phenomena, compete with the representatives of descriptive historical approaches and normatively critical schools of neo-Marxist origin.

This lack of agreement on the goals of political science is an obstacle not only to a cumulative process of learning about the causes of past political phenomena and trends, but also to ways of transforming viable findings on cause-and-effect relationships into predictions of future developments. Although economics, too, has its debates on theories and methods, there is a basic consensus that theories and methods should be meas-

ured by their ability to *explain* economic phenomena, which greatly facilitates that transformation into scientific forecasts. They, of course, seek to draw from the factors that explain past events conclusions for statements on the likelihood of future events or trends.

Furthermore, the work of political scientists on predictions is often regarded as a scientifically inferior business. This leads to less emphasis generally being placed on such forecasting methods as simulation techniques and scenario analyses in the curricula of political science courses. The potential proximity of forecasting studies to practical policy and policy advice also acts as an obstacle in Germany, owing to the (mutually engendered) fear of contact between policy and political science. A concern not infrequently felt by political

scientists in this context is that, in the public perception at least, they may be reduced to the role of observing and advising on policy. On the other hand, the value of a social science should not be measured solely by reference to its ability to make reliable statements on the likelihood of future events and trends using scientific methods. Political science should be more active than hitherto in taking up this challenge, with an eye to developments outside as well as within the OECD world. For, despite the heterogeneity of the subject areas it covers, it has the scientific foundations needed for this purpose and may therefore act, to some extent at least, as a counterbalance to crude assessments by numerous self-styled experts from which the public often form their image of political processes in distant countries.



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