



**SYMPOSIUM "PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH SERENDIPITIES"**

# Political Scientist as a Historian

Erkki Berndtson

erkki.berndtson@helsinki.fi

Social science theories are few and those we have are based on assumptions that are difficult to verify; Kuhnian revolutions are hard to find in the social sciences. We tend to develop new perspectives for research instead. These perspectives, however, are not always due to critical thinking, as we are often directed towards new ideas by accident rather than by consciously chosen theoretical work.

This has certainly been the case in my own research. I started my academic career as a methodologist in the 1970s. Soon after, however, I became interested in the history of political science, especially the history of American political science, which was still a hegemonic discourse in political science at the time. I read theoretical and empirical literature of the leading, and not-so leading, political scientists. I wrote about theoreticians, from John W. Burgess through Charles E. Merriam to David Easton, and I read empirical studies from *The American Voter* to *Who Governs?*

In 1983, I received a Fulbright grant to study the history of American political science at the University of Chicago. One of the reasons for applying to Chicago was my interest in the old Chicago School of Political Science, but perhaps more important was my wish to discuss political science with David Easton. However, when I came to Chicago, Easton had just left for Irvine and I was assigned as a Visiting Scholar to the History Department instead. As one of its senior members, Barry D. Karl had written a book about Charles E. Merriam. I was so happy to receive the Fulbright grant that I did not want to protest about my placement among historians!

When I met Karl, he took me into the University Library's Department of Special Collections and suggested that I should take a look at Charles E. Merriam's personal papers. When I started to read them I became fascinated with the picture that emerged. They contained Merriam's correspondence with other scholars, with the people of power and money and letters from citizens while Merriam served as an alderman in the Chicago City Council as well as manuscripts, memos and organizational records. The only problem was that there were over 300 boxes of papers, which meant that during my time in Chicago I did not read much else. I had become a true historian doing archival research. I even went through the papers of Quincy Wright and Leonard D. White as well as those of scholars in the neighboring disciplines, such as Albion Small, Robert Park, T.V. Smith, Louis Wirth, George Herbert Mead, William Ogburn and Ernest Burgess.

I believe that my placement in the History Department changed my research perspective and eventually enable me to do deeper work than if I had continued my original focus solely on theories and approaches in the study of politics. In addition to the effect on my work, my archival research helped me to become a member of a small group of scholars, who, on the initiative of David Easton,



formed the *International Committee for the Study of the Development of Political Science* in 1985. So I met David after all!

The second transformative period for my studies of the history of political science began in 1999. At this time I was asked to become a member of the Steering Committee of the *Thematic Network in Political Science*, which later developed into *European Political Science Network (epsNet)*. One of the main objectives of *epsNet* was to focus on teaching in political science. I served the two networks from 2000 until 2005. As a member of *epsNet's* Executive Council and its Co-ordinating Committee I came across problems arising from the Bologna Process about the agenda of European Higher Education. Through this work, I became more aware of how scientific disciplines have been defined by the structures of Higher Education institutions. Chicago had made me a historian, but *epsNet* made me a historical institutionalist. I also began to understand the immense variety of European political studies; how different cultural conditions still frame political science as a discipline.

My personal intellectual development has been heavily influenced by Chicago and *epsNet*. However, although I wanted to go to Chicago, my stay there turned into some other than what I had planned. *EpsNet*, on the other hand, was a totally unplanned project for me. I believe that social scientists are like driftwood. Nevertheless, as Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince*, "it may be true that fortune is the ruler of half of our actions, but that she allows the other half or thereabouts to be governed by us". He compared fortune with a river, which can be furious and destructive, but when it is quiet, people can prepare themselves to defend against its future turbulences. It is the same with social sciences. One should consciously plan her/his research during times of quiet reading and thinking. However, one should not remain a prisoner of her/his theoretical models and approaches when new opportunities arise; one can find new only through the unexpected. For this, it is good to let the river take you to unknown territories.

Erkki Berndtson is an independent research in political science and lives in Helsinki, Finland.