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Bertjan Verbeek*

The Importance of *Property, Power and Politics* to Political Science

I. Introduction: Repositioning Political Science in Its Historical and Intellectual Roots

Jean-Philippe Robé's book *Property, Power and Politics (PPP)* is of vital interest to political science for at least two reasons. First, it fills two important lacunae with respect to two notions that are at the heart of the discipline: power and accountability. Second, in doing so, *PPP* manages to integrate the study of economics, international relations, law, and politics, thus (implicitly) illustrating the value of reconnecting the field to its historical and intellectual roots.

As a modern academic discipline, political science originates in many different extant disciplines (Almond 1996). For one, political science drew from those moral philosophers, such as Adam Smith, who saw the political and economic domains as inherently interwoven. Then, it built on the legal philosophers and sociologists such as Max Weber, who, particularly in the nineteenth century, were fascinated by the rise of the state as an entity. It also combined insights from law and history in order to develop the study of international relations, especially after the First World War. Finally, it profited from the development of sociology as an empirical social science in studying the behavior of individuals and organizations within the contexts of states. The twentieth century, however, witnessed specialization, and by consequence, the distancing of political science from all of these fellow travelers.

In the twenty-first century, political science is increasingly developing into a core of studies of political behavior (especially political attitudes and electoral behavior) surrounded by a collection of subfields (global political economy, political philosophy, political psychology, political sociology). These subfields have effectively moved away from the founders, who saw the domain of politics in its entirety (including its economic, sociological, and legal aspects). Political science has particularly lost its connection with the legal discipline. Indeed, even the so-called neo-institutional revolution of the 1990s, itself an understandable protest against the focus on behavior without taking rules into account, preferred to focus on informal rather than formal rules (Peters 2011). An exception are the scholars of electoral systems, who are well aware of the impact of formal electoral rules on representation and accountability. Robé's *PPP* should be applauded for returning the domain of politics to a wider notion of society that also entails moral, economic, and legal dimensions. He particularly succeeds in integrating law and economics into political science.

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II. Setting the Stage: Reconceptualizing Power

Power has always been part of the set of concepts employed by political scientists when they seek to understand or explain political phenomena. By tapping into law and economics, *PPP* offers political scientists a more comprehensive notion of power that helps them understand the contemporary world system. In doing so, the book implicitly embraces and expands the concept of structural power developed by one of the founders of the field of Global Political Economy, Susan Strange.

Following the pioneering work of Steven Lukes (Lukes 1974), Strange expanded on what Lukes called the third face of power. The first face of power refers to the classical notion in which A succeeds in making B do something B does not want to do (Dahl 1957). The second face relates to the capacity to set the political agenda, introducing the famous notion of non-decisions (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). Lukes's third face focuses on those real-world situations that we take for granted, thus legitimizing and reinforcing a situation that benefits some and harms others. Susan Strange explored the latter notion.

Strange argues that we cannot understand the choices societies make when setting priorities between four values (security, wealth, justice, and liberty) without taking the role of structural power into account (Strange 1988). Structural power refers to the overt or hidden capacity to determine for specific societal domains (such as trade, transportation, or climate policy) the rules of the game, as well as who is accepted as a legitimate player in that game. Within that framework, actors can be dealt a better or worse hand. Relational power refers to the capacity of players to play the game well, given the hand of cards at their disposal and given the preset rules. Importantly, Strange distinguishes between four interrelated dimensions of structural power: One can possess structural power in (military) security; in finance (the capacity to determine the price of credit); in production (the capacity to determine what is produced at what terms); and knowledge (the capacity to generate and distribute essential knowledge) (Strange 1990).¹ Here I argue that Robé's *PPP* adds sustainability as a fifth value to Strange's mix of societal values, and that it adds property as a—so far ignored—fifth dimension of structural power.

Strange, one of the first academics to signal the contemporary phase of economic and financial globalization in the 1980s,² argued that structural power has dispersed in the current global political economy. By consequence, outcomes in terms of the distributions of wealth, security, liberty, and justice had changed. In the past, structural power was concentrated in the hands of sovereign states, and distributional outcomes were thus a product of the political struggles within states. Now, globalization has eroded the state's monopoly and has transferred structural power in many dimensions, particularly finance, into the hands of global firms, global media, and global investors (Strange 1996). This is not to say that states have become obsolete, as has often been argued in the past, but that states now are just one type of actors among many with different bargaining chips. Hence Strange's plea for studying state-firm and firm-firm diplomacy (Stopford and Strange 1991).³ Importantly, for her this raised the issue of accountability. She was wary of possibilities of having some form of accountability for the new possessors of structural power, especially firms, and suggested that neither global accountancy firms nor intergovernmental organizations could fill the accountability gap (Strange 1996, 135–146, 161–180). At the same time, Strange worried about the accountability gap in domestic politics created by the reduced

¹ The notion of structural power is already implicitly present in Strange (1975).

² First formulated in Strange (1984) and most accessibly presented in Strange (1994).

³ For Robé, states continue to play a relevant role: “globalization is also a process of globalization of the State System” (Robé 2020, 122).

policy autonomy of governments (Strange 1995, 55–74). *PPP* exactly seeks to address these accountability issues of a globalized world order.

In his work, Robé expands and improves on Strange’s analytical framework. First, he shows that prioritizing between the values of liberty, justice, security, and wealth is always realized at a price in terms of exploiting earth’s resources—thus addressing a value we nowadays label “sustainability” (1–2, 33–349). Clearly, *PPP*’s plea for recognizing sustainability as part of the value tradeoff changes the way we empirically describe and morally assess societal outcomes in the current global political economy. Importantly, whereas Strange still allows for societies to isolate themselves from the world economy if they choose to, and thus to introduce the value hierarchy they prefer (for instance, North Korea prioritizing security over all other values), *PPP* drives home the realization that in a global political economy, societies are no longer able to do so. Robé argues that a transformation of global accounting presents the best case to ensure that sustainability is part of the equation, by ensuring that prices in the world economy truly reflect the costs in terms of sustainability.

Second, *PPP* convincingly argues that the dominant notion of property is a key dimension of structural power in world politics. Only by recognizing that property is a societal domain embedded in law can we understand who are constituted as legitimate actors in society. Property rights are thus essential to select the players of the game, making it a quintessential element of structural power, as conceived by Strange. *PPP* shows how globalization has reduced the governmental capacity to correct any undesired outcomes of the dominant property system, as specific (Western) notions of property themselves have become globalized. *PPP* thus nicely fits in with the recent scholarly attention to the clash between contemporary notions of property rights and alternative, sometimes traditional notions of property, as can be witnessed in the clashes between Indigenous peoples and governments and firms over the exploitation of natural resources in, for instance, the Amazon rain forest (Eimer and Donadelli 2022). Importantly, *PPP* demonstrates that understanding the processes of legal reasoning and compliance is key to understanding the currently dominant global notion of property. Political scientists thus need to break down the walls between them and the discipline of law. Previous attempts to do so, often labeled the legalization of world politics (Goldstein et al. 2000), failed to capture the distinct dynamics of law. Possibly, only in studies of the European Union have political scientists and legal scholars succeeded to bring their combined insights to successful fruition (Burley and Mattli 1993; Garrett 1995).

Third, *PPP* emphasizes how globalization reinforces the salience of accountability. Globalization makes it more difficult, if not impossible, for states to act as the player that should and can intervene when the dominant property regime causes negative externalities, such as climate change. This reduced policy autonomy of states in turn creates domestic societal problems. States that are less efficacious lose legitimacy with their citizens; citizens, in turn, become disposed to support populist politicians who potentially pose a threat to democratic institutions (Robé, 1).⁴ *PPP* addresses the issue of dealing with negative externalities by advocating that firms no longer focus on short-term objectives, often translated into maximizing shareholders’ benefits, but rather take long-term consequences into account. This would also help to promote a more sustainable world political economy. All this could, in Robé’s view, not take place under a future world government, but will be achieved via accounting institutions.

⁴ Not always is populism detrimental to democracy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2019).

III. Bringing in the Players

PPP offers an innovative and consistent perspective on power in the contemporary world political economy that helps to realign disciplines that had long parted ways. The book, however, pays little attention to the actors involved.

First, *PPP* argues that understanding the organization of property is essential to understanding power. It also suggests how a specific notion of property has spread across the globe, and how this has rendered control of negative externalities by states very difficult. Yet, *PPP* does not fully capture the causal mechanism behind this development. The role of lawyers and the distinct way they reason seem to be keys to a more complete understanding. Despite the book's elaborate history of property, it remains unclear how rival narratives surrounding property emerged, and how a specific perspective eventually became dominant. For example, when discussing the constitutional revolutions of the twentieth century, there is a depiction of different legal perspectives and changing societal circumstances (176–182), but it remains unclear how at a specific moment new principles are embraced: is it because of a change in dominant doctrine, and, if so, what actors brought that about? Is it because of societal changes that mobilize lawyers with new perspectives and arguments? These questions are even more pressing at the global level where compliance is even more difficult to achieve: How do global narratives on property emerge among lawyers? Via what mechanism is a specific narrative embraced and complied with? Here, future legal studies can profit from the work on the emergence of, and competition between, international norms in the international relations literature (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Van Kersbergen and Verbeek 2007). It also requires a more explicit exploration of the drivers behind the transnational (legal) behavior of (international) lawyers (Sikkink 2002).

Second, *PPP* pays relatively little attention to other actors than economic and political actors, in particular non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements. At the same time, the history of contemporary globalization (say, since the mid-1980s) shows that the signaling of negative externalities and the pressure put on firms, either directly via consumers and investors, or indirectly via governments and intergovernmental organizations, have come from (transnational and national) NGOs and social movements. Attention to inequality, diversity, climate change, and human rights was achieved through persistent advocacy, lobbying, and, sometimes, activism by these actors. For example, the World Trade Organization thus was forced to take a wide range of interests and perspectives into account. Arguably, this is one the reasons why the current Doha Round was never brought to a successful conclusion (Kelly 2002). NGOs and social movements employ lawyers representing different narratives of property (think of NGOs defending Indigenous rights). It is important to recognize that the battle for narratives includes more actors than (lawyers representing) governments and firms. That realization may contribute to strengthening accountability: if sustainability is the norm that has been internalized by political and economic actors over the past decades, then NGOs and social movements have played a vital role in this. Any global institutional arrangement of accountability should thus ensure the presence of different narratives.

IV. Conclusion: The Curtain Falls—What Sequel?

The 2020s have thus far been dominated by a global pandemic (COVID-19), and the return of the use or threat of force to solve territorial disputes (the Russian-Ukrainian war; the People's Republic of China over Taiwan). These major events usher in two issues that pertain to the argument developed in *PPP*. First, the relative ease with which Russia seems to have weathered initially the storm of international sanctions after its attack on Ukraine raises the question: To what extent is property unlikely to be taken back by the state (Robé 2020, 165)? Actors nullify

existing economic agreements for political reasons. War changes the priority mix societies choose between values, and it may lead them to prioritize security over wealth or justice. Depending on one's perspective in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Western states prioritize justice (Ukrainian sovereignty) over wealth by accepting economic hardship, and, for the moment, these societies accept this hardship. Second, the rise of China presents the issue of whether, in the near future, the world political economy will face a hegemon that has different ideas regarding property. China may continue to embrace the rules of the global capitalist system, but it will certainly monitor the impact on its domestic political system. It, thus, eventually may prefer a different dominant narrative regarding property. Last, *PPP* seems to assume that globalization will continue. However, the pandemic and the war, both phenomena that in different ways bring home the salience of domestic security, suggest that it is not impossible that the world political economy has reached the limits of globalization, at least for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the demise of domestic democratic institutions, signaled at the beginning of *PPP*, may reflect a similar process of reaching limits. In that sense, the sequel to *PPP* should also discuss how improved global accountability will also strengthen local states.

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