

Political Scientists as Consultants and Advisors: David Natali

David Natali is an Associate Professor at the University of Bologna at Forlì. He holds a PhD in political science from the European University Institute of Florence (EUI, 2002). The specific focus of his research is the comparative analysis of pensions, the EU coordination of social protection and social inclusion policy, the Lisbon Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy. He is also working on social concertation and social dialog in broader terms, across Europe. He has been involved in several European integrated projects and networks of excellence financed through the 6th and 7th Framework Programmes (including NEUJOBS, NEWGOV, INTUNE, RECWOWE). He coordinated several research projects on pensions and the EU social dimension and the comparative analysis of pension reforms.

IPS: Can you briefly describe your typical tasks and working day? Are you happy in your current job?

Academic life is complex and in fact consists of many different activities. Rather than in an ivory tower, scholars are increasingly involved in many respects in political life. Applied research is one of these respects, as well as the collaboration with policymakers at different levels. While teaching and research are the main part of my daily life, I am involved in the reflection group on EU governance of the Italian Presidency of the Council (headed by the secretary of State for European Affairs, Sandro Gozi). On top of that, I am involved in the European Social Policy Network (ESPN), the set of experts of social policy that support the European Commission in monitoring and assessing welfare reforms across the EU and in other projects supported by EU stakeholders.

IPS: Is your job the result of a tenaciously pursued project, or rather of an opportunity you seized? Had you planned this type of career whilst you were studying because you were attracted by it, or rather is it the result of a later choice? Did studying Political Science matter?

My professional life has been quite peculiar. After my PhD at the European University Institute of Florence, I left Italy and worked in Brussels for an independent research institute. I thus left academic institutions to be fully involved in the network of policy analysts based in Brussels. I worked for the European Social Observatory in a project financed by the Belgian Government in the field of pensions to analyze the first results of the new EU mode of coordination in the area: the Open Method of Coordination. At that time, I lived through a big shift: from an academic expert on comparative politics, I turned to comparative policy analysis and I started approaching EU integration studies. The methodological, analytical and theoretical background I got during the PhD program was crucial in my decision to start working in new fields and through different analytical if not disciplinary

lenses. Even after my return to academia, I have continued trying to find a shared ground between more academic research on one hand, and applied research on other.

IPS: People you work with often have a different educational background to you. What are the competing academic backgrounds in your working environment? Do you perceive you have an advantage or disadvantage vis-à-vis these colleagues? What does such advantage or disadvantage consist of?

Those who are involved in policymaking have very different backgrounds. Between analysts, for instance, economists have a leading role. To some extent they have monopolized the activity of knowledge-diffusion. They have an advantage compared to political scientists: they simplify reality and give clear messages to policy-makers and stakeholders. Political scientists tend, by contrast, to make things complex and to give articulated and complex answers.

IPS: Is there anything not written in textbooks that you have learned thanks to your work experience, and that you would recommend should be taught to politics and policy students?

Policymaking is not a purely rational activity. Many factors that shape the way policymakers interpret problems and solutions are imponderable and do not reflect a “synoptic rationality.” That said, I have found my own background—policy analysis, policy studies, etc.—extremely useful and able to provide the right analytical toolkit to understand politics.

IPS: Can you identify who has an academic background similar to yours on the basis of their approach to problem setting and problem solving? Or rather do you think that other differences or similarities (e.g., personality, political orientation, other peculiarities) matter more than academic background?

As stressed above, a key cleavage is between economists on the one hand and the other social scientists on the other. The latter tend to share similar methods and analytical frameworks. But personal profiles are extremely important too. Analysts tend to show different styles and attitudes irrespective of their scientific background.

IPS: How would you re-organize (if needed) courses in political science (including its sub-disciplines) in order to structure a curriculum that could naturally lead to activities as the policy advisor?

Political studies have experienced a huge transformation in recent years. The academic track—with doctoral studies followed by fellowships, and more stable contracts—is increasingly “contaminated” with more policy-oriented research for policy-makers and/or stakeholders. This is a promising aspect that needs to be cultivated with an on-going dialog between universities and institutions involved in the policymaking process. Recent attempts to open academic institutions with seminars, roundtables, internships and joint research projects with non-academic institutions are very promising in that sense. At the same time, some risks are evident: academic research risks passively accepting the policy-makers’ agenda both in terms of topics and analytical and theoretical frameworks.

IPS: Should political science scholars “get their hands dirty,” i.e., intervene more in politics and policy making, so that they gain in relevance? As far as your activity domain is concerned, is it possible to distinguish easily between technical knowledge on the one hand, and political values and policy preferences on the other?

Some dialog—if not interference between politics, policymaking and political studies—has always been evident. If we look back at the origin of political studies, for instance, it is clear that the dialog with policymakers enriches scientific knowledge. This is potentially beneficial for the two sides: for the analysts this allows for an immediate feedback to their theories and frameworks, while for policymakers and practitioners, political scientists, it allows for a sense of reality. But this is a fragile balance between different priorities and ways to look at politics.

IPS: For a political science scholar who wants to be active and produce an impact on policy making, is it easier to do it by studying the policy process or rather by being fully part of the process as decision maker?

To be honest, I think all political scientists aspire to being somehow involved in politics and policymaking. First, this is the result of intellectual curiosity. They want to be close to the political life to improve their own knowledge of political dynamics. Yet different scholars may have different ambitions: some may want to prescribe some decisions or courses of policies, while others feel the risk of being involved in what they study.

IPS: What is the added value of the political science scholar to the job of policy practitioner?

Policymakers and stakeholders tend to focus on the short term: they need solutions to address major problems. They need these solutions to be consistent with their own interests and ideological backgrounds. But they do not have time for an in depth analysis of both problems and solutions and the link between the two, so they need scholars and experts to shed light both on problems and solutions with a longer-term view.

IPS: And, vice versa, how is the profession of policy practitioner improving the academic work?

Academics tend to be concentrated on theories and analytical concepts and grids. They often risk being at the margin of political and social life, in an ivory tower. They thus need to have a dialog with those who live the day-by-day political and socio-economic dynamics. It is crucial to have a feedback about theories and analytical framework and to have direct access to empirical information.

IPS: What are the disadvantages of mixing up theoretical knowledge and “practice”?

The major risk is to be trapped in a purely ideological discourse set by practitioners and to lack the necessary autonomy to analyze the evidence of politics with a sound method. What is more, the world of politics and that of science are partly inconsistent. I refer to the different approaches they follow, for instance in terms of time frame. The time perspective of scholars is long and slow. They need time for in depth analyses. By contrast, policymaking is rapid and need fast solutions. It is thus hard to strike a deal between these two different time frames. Sometimes the analyst basically cannot provide the knowledge policymakers demand and should thus resist from giving inaccurate inputs.