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BOOK REVIEW:

**RAINER EISFELD, *RADICAL APPROACHES TO POLITICAL SCIENCE. ROADS LESS TRAVELED***

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As the title of Rainer Eisfeld's recent book *Radical Approaches to Political Science. Roads less traveled* suggests, the publication highlights topics infrequently covered by mainstream political science, which traditionally focuses on issues such as political and party systems, elections, political institutions etc. This statement is especially true for the second part of the title; as the author himself explains, it derives from a suggestion made by his colleague and co-author of his earlier book, Leslie Pal, who said that "roads less traveled" alludes to "searching where others have not".

Additionally, in the first part of the title there is another important piece of information regarding the content of the book. It is expressed in the word "radical" which, as the acclaimed political scientist Klaus von Beyme states in the *Introduction*: "in German sounds 'more radical' than in Anglo-Saxon tradition and French ideologies". As von Beyme further explains: "Radicalism implies two aspects of the characterisation of a way of thinking within political science: a *normative position* that is not satisfied with a focus on individuals' political behavior and on institutions, as has been predominant since the behavioral revolution in the United States, a rather *moderate leftist position* as an engaged political scientist."

The book is indeed the work of an engaged political scientist. Rainer Eisfeld, today professor emeritus of political science at Osnabruck University received his PhD at the University of Frankfurt: the institution, which, given the tradition and legacy of its school of critical thinking developed by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and later Jürgen Habermas, was, as von Beyme also writes in the *Introduction*: "the incarnation of a normative position of committed leftist social scientists". Not surprisingly, for a disciple of this kind of thinking within political science, Eisfeld's first two books were titled: *Pluralismus zwischen Liberalismus und Sozialismus* (*Pluralism between Liberalism and Socialism*) and *Sozialistischer Pluralismus in Europa* (*Socialist Pluralism in Europe*), respectively. And yet, although recognised as a "radical liberal", Eisfeld has never opted for any form of authoritarianism: neither socialism nor communism. His inspiration was primarily the works of the British thinker Harold Laski and especially Laski's ideas of a dynamic pluralist. Pluralism became the ideological basis of the opposition to authoritarian communism. It achieved relevance after its collapse in Central and Eastern Europe when the states of the

former socialist bloc started transitioning themselves towards democracy, all in the context of an ever greater interconnectedness between the peoples and markets.

These processes, as Eisfeld argues in the first essay titled *Political Science Taking Sides – Why, How?* had a significant impact on contemporary political science. On the one hand, they led to unprecedented advances in the discipline's institutionalisation, especially in the newly democratising countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This observation has allowed Eisfeld to refute the allegations, also formulated by some prominent political scientists, that political science has been "out of step with the world". On the other hand, Eisfeld, being a thorough researcher of both the discipline and the achievements (or lack thereof) made by his fellow political scientists, notes that very few political scientists have paid attention to the phenomena that are behind these macro processes. By doing so, he continues, they've been ignoring issues that are at the very heart of politics, namely: power and authority, participation and control over agenda setting.

Therefore, propagating an engaged role in political science and political scientists, Eisfeld believes that as much as the capitalist economies require tough regulation, the discipline of political science needs to (re-)define itself as a science of democracy. He finishes the manifesto-essay with a poignant statement: "Political science must address the public – the citizens whom it needs to win as an audience – and it must take sides in the doing. As a science of democracy it is inevitably partisan."

For a Polish reader, one of the most interesting essays is titled: *Towards Creating a Discipline with a 'Regional Stamp': Central-East European Political Science and Ethno-Cultural Diversity*. In this text, Eisfeld focuses on the idiosyncrasies of political science in Central and Eastern Europe, where institutional cooperation and research networks are still underdeveloped, and where political science has been marked by an almost absence of critical theory. Consequently, the dominating approach is still institutionalism with a strong emphasis on current policy-making and applied research. Political science, as practiced in the region, is then descriptive although, as Eisfeld rightly points out, it is here more than anywhere else where it should play the role of a critical and often oppositionist force. It should be publically critical of power structures skewed in favor of ethnically privileged majorities. Therefore, in the next essay, titled *Pluralism and Democratic Governance: A Century of Changing Research Frameworks*, Eisfeld states, among others, that "pluralism may well (re-)emerge as the discipline's dominant paradigm for inquiry into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural polities." The essay reviews a century of pluralist investigation into how economy, civil society and government have been interacting and how they should interact, whilst another essay (titled: *Pluralism as a Critical Political Theory*) links pluralism and socialism as complementary tasks.

Evidently, as Eisfeld argues throughout the book, external factors have been influencing the shape of political science which, despite its aspiration to be the discipline of objective analysis, has also fallen prey to numerous temptations and ideological pressures. Bearing this in mind, another great value of the book lies in the essay titled *German Political Science at the Crossroads: The Ambivalent Response to the 1933 Nazi Seizure of Power*. Its conclusions result from Eisfeld's research on the complexities of German political science, embodied by the German Political Studies Institute (*Deutsche Hochschule für Politik*), established in

the interwar period, and its response to the non-democratic regime of the Third Reich. In this text, Eisfeld proves wrong quite a “comfortable” and popular narrative that since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century German political science, with such prominent figures as Hannah Arendt, Hans J. Morgenthau or Karl W. Deutsch being forced into exile, was immune to the non-democratic influences of the Nazi regime. Eisfeld questions this belief arguing that it was “hetero- rather than homogeneity which marked German political science before and during the Nazi seizure of power”. As the basis of this thesis, Eisfeld distinguishes three different schools (a national, a functional, and a democratic approach) which had started to evolve in Germany in the interwar period and which reacted differently to the introduction and later implementation of the new regime.

Throughout this seminal analysis, Eisfeld reveals the extraordinary skill of examining heavily burdened axiological issues with adequate distance and perspective. And although this skill is what distinguishes the work of an academic from the writing of a journalist or political commentator, experience in many countries (Germany and Poland included) shows that issues of such a sensitive nature as succumbing to a totalitarian regime are at the highest risk of not being objectively examined: scientists not being excluded from this. This explains why our knowledge of them often remains based on preconceptions rather than academic research. This statement also holds true for the next issue tackled in the essay titled *Myths and Realities of Frontier Violence: A Look at the Gunfighter Saga* in which Eisfeld argues that the American myth of a violent frontier “evolved into a ‘venerable tradition’ and for this reason continues to guide the American society’s collective perceptions of present and future course of actions.”

The final two essays focus on Portugal’s transition to democracy. Today, they may seem like a prophecy and warning at the same time. Eisfeld first published these words in 1986: “Portugal has been and is, economically as well as politically, a weak applicant. It will remain weak during the rest of the 1980s. The European Community cannot prevent that. But contrary to what is commonly said and even assumed, accession might make matters, by its impact, considerably worse for the country.” Evidently, the global economic crisis which started in 2008 hit Portugal very hard, bringing Eisfeld’s predictions to reality resulting in the European Union investing billions of Euros in bailouts and rescue packages. Additionally, if we take Eisfeld’s discourse on Portugal and apply it to today’s context of countries in the eastern half of Europe we can see a parallel argument. Ukraine, which is a very large Eastern European country, also has aspirations of joining the EU. It does not take profound knowledge of international affairs to say that as a state, Ukraine is economically and politically weak. Hence, we could very well be repeating what Eisfeld observed for Portugal in the 1980s in twenty years from now.

Summarising, *Radical Approaches to Political Science* is a unique collection of essays which is of value not only to any political scientist sensitive to political phenomena and their developments, but also or perhaps primarily, to all those who in their academic work find room for methodological reflection with regards to the state of our discipline. It is this kind of awareness that affords us the avoidance of such pitfalls as excessive descriptiveness and aim at what Eisfeld propagates throughout the book: becoming critical thinkers. By doing so, we can master the science of democracy.