

## **Political Psychology as Discipline and Resource**

**Adela Garzón Pérez**

*Department of Psychology, University of Valencia*

---

*Around the 1960s, political psychology was developed as a field of knowledge that attempted to interrelate scientific psychology and political phenomena. However, social and academic conditions are very different today. More and more, political psychology is becoming a protagonist, as much in the internal context of psychology as in the external context of its relations with the social world. Thus, political psychology can now be seen as a resource relating psychological knowledge to social practice, and relating psychological processes to social action. Political psychology is the interface that puts psychology and society in contact. The development of political psychology in Spain provides an example of this alternative view of the field.*

---

**KEY WORDS:** political psychology, discipline, resource, correspondence, democratization of knowledge.

It has become increasingly clear that the activities and concerns of political psychologists not only depend on their geographic and scientific location, but also vary considerably over time. As a result, space and time are two essential coordinates for interpreting both content and meaning in the field of political psychology (Garzón, 1988). In this context, it is useful to draw a distinction between two ways of understanding political psychology. The first defines it as a field of knowledge, with the emphasis on empirical and cumulative investigation of a particular set of themes. The second sees it as an activating resource, fostering a productive relationship between psychological inquiry and social practice, between psychological processes and social action. From this latter standpoint, political psychology becomes the interface that connects psychology and society (McGuire, 1993; Seoane, 1995).

Until recently, political psychology was primarily a field of knowledge, consisting of a theoretical corpus, a self-justifying methodology, and a circumscribed set of topics. Theory and research were applicable to political issues within society, but psychologists themselves were not typically engaged in political

action. Psychological science was held to be value-neutral or non-partisan, and thus not itself a form of advocacy. For many reasons, however, it has been difficult to sustain this view of the field. For one, we are experiencing a crisis in the traditional model of science, in particular the view that either theory or research can be non-partisan. Further, there is growing resistance to vertical models of knowledge, both within the intellectual world and in society more generally, with a privileged (and often unengaged) minority speaking to a majority who are often profoundly immersed in the processes at stake. Finally, the conception of circumscribed knowledge classes, set apart from each other and from society, is rapidly disappearing.

The search for alternatives to the disciplinary tradition is very much in motion and scarcely complete. However, there is a strong sense that we now have the opportunity to collectively build a new form of political psychology. This alternative is suggested in the title of this paper: political psychology as a *resource*. Some aspects of political psychology in Spain exemplify this view of the field, and I consider these below. I do not intend to describe the complete history of Spanish political psychology, but only to select aspects that illustrate the vision of psychology as a resource. I chose the Spanish case because of familiarity, not because it is fundamental to the main argument.

### **Political Psychology as a Field of Knowledge**

Numerous topics of concern arise when political psychology is seen as a field of knowledge, such as the twin problems of definition and aim, the question of pioneers and founders, channels of distribution (e.g., journals, associations, conferences), and the study of all the different phenomena that have helped to make up its structure or subject matter. This is not an appropriate context for reviewing these issues; there are other excellent texts to consult (Hermann, 1986; Knutson, 1973; Stone, 1974). Here, I wish only to point to three major characteristics of political psychology as a field of knowledge. First, it has always been sensitive to matters of social urgency. Second, from its beginning it has tried to relate psychological theory to political phenomena. Finally, as a traditional field of knowledge, it has aspired to universals in both theory and method. Whether intended or not, it was a body of knowledge that would traverse geographical frontiers.

Psychology in general, and specifically political psychology, has always been focused on the particular social problems that it tries to resolve at any one time. As a field of study, political psychology arose from the applied practice of trying to relate psychological phenomena to political reality, as exemplified by such well-known works as *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), Milgram's work on obedience to authority, or *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Similarly in Spain, Unamuno (1895/1998) drew on the psychology of personality to explain the identity and character of Spanish people, while Ortega y Gasset—a forerunner of

current political psychology in Spain—developed the idea of politics as education (*la política como educación*) to interpret events in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century (Ortega y Gasset, 1914/1966, 1930/1990).

This movement in political psychology developed common space between psychology and politics, and it was grounded in the scientific theories of psychology (McGuire, 1993). A psychological interpretation of politics began to develop, and gradually its field of investigation became more defined. Political psychology's initial field of study focused on political personality traits, the psychological basis of ideologies, and went on to tackle issues such as non-conventional participation, political communication, and political violence. Later, the focus shifted increasingly to issues that tended to be ignored by political scientists.

Political psychology as a field of knowledge has become a discipline that cuts across geographic boundaries. Its history can be summarized in three main stages, irrespective of the particular geographical setting. The first stage, a philosophical one more concerned with political theory, can usually be linked to a lack of definition and methodological diversity. The second stage is more scientific and systematic and begins with academic regulation, the appearance of the first journals and handbooks, the defining of the field, and the recognition of specific founders. The third stage of growth, consolidation, and expansion leads to an increased openness of content and a broadening of methods. These stages in its evolution have occurred in similar ways in North America (Iyengar & McGuire, 1993; Stone, 1981), Latin America (Montero, 1986), France (Dorna, 1994), and in many other regions, including Spain (Jimenez Burillo, 1996; Garzón, 1993, 1994; Sabucedo, 1996).

The boundaries of political psychology as a field of knowledge have become gradually blurred over the years, paralleling the epistemological crisis of science in general and the resulting problem of the validity of scientific knowledge. The difficulty of maintaining clear divisions between different fields of knowledge, the insuperable divergence between method and reality, and the growing demand for a more egalitarian, socially concerned, and above all less elitist social practice have led to a reframing of traditional psychological knowledge (Ibáñez, 1983).

### **Political Psychology as a Resource**

The concept of political psychology as a resource is emerging as an effective alternative to the traditional view of disciplinary knowledge in psychology. More than a defined field of knowledge, political psychology is becoming a strategy, a tool for relating different realities. It represents the way in which the psychologist tries to adjust a scientific orientation in full crisis with the fragmented and conflicting discourses in society. In this sense, it is a heuristic adjustment, one that allows psychologists to make a science in transformation compatible with a society with urgencies and social demands. It aims toward collective and collaborative solutions, forgetting the old doctrine of scientific authority. As a heuristic, it carries

out the role that Gergen (1999) attributed to dialogue and negotiation. Finally, in its closer relationship to the lived realities of the peoples whom it serves, political psychology as a heuristic significantly opens the field of study and action.

The development of political psychology as a resource has been assisted in the Spanish case by two significant heuristics: *contextualization* and *analogic comparison*. In the former case, psychologists find it increasingly useful to view events within particular sociohistorical contexts. Attitudes, values, political agendas, policies, rationales, institutions, and so on are all developed within particularistic contexts. To understand and speak to a given political issue thus requires both historical and social analysis. In the case of psychology itself, if we take a historical view of society, we can rapidly discern a relationship between the modus operandi of psychology and different stages of societal development. For example, there can be no doubt that stimulus-response psychology reflects and corresponds to the needs of an industrial society, with its vision of human beings as agents of production (stimulated by incentives to produce) on the one hand, and consumers (stimulated by advertising to purchase) on the other. A correspondence can also be found between the needs of the information society and the emerging conception of the mind as relational (socially networked) process.

This contextual understanding of various institutions, beliefs, values, and the like can also be applied to political psychology. When individuals are defined in terms of their production and consumption (industrial/consumer society), then a political psychology that lends itself to the prediction and control of political behavior is favored. In an information society, where groups can quickly identify themselves, generate a political agenda, and demonstrate against the status quo, political psychology becomes more concerned with discourse and political communication.

As a second heuristic of importance to psychology as a resource, psychologists find analogic analyses especially useful. Here the analyst searches for analogues between facts, constellations of events, theories, and so on that belong to different areas or domains of knowledge, and possibly to different moments in time. This form of analysis does not presuppose any relationship of cause or effect, nor any specific focus; often it may resemble a rudimentary form of correlational analysis. To find and to establish these correspondences, we must adopt a comparative and historical procedure that enables us to recognize certain phenomena that exist in different domains in different disguises. In terms of historical forerunners, Comte (1842/1934) pointed out, for example, that each stage of human knowledge has its reflection in certain political attitudes, and Spengler (1917/1983) established correspondences among diverse cultures in different historical periods. With the stress thus placed on contextualization and analogic interpretation, we no longer refer to a globally defined discipline. Rather, we find multiple and differentiated political psychologies that speak to the social and political realities of a given moment in time and a particular geographical location.

### Political Psychology as Discipline: The Spanish Case

To appreciate the force of the preceding remarks, it is useful to take a closer look at the emergence of political psychology in Spain. Let us consider first the struggle toward establishing political psychology as a discipline of study. The Spanish case is an interesting one, because its peculiarities and its idiosyncratic way of applying political psychology have survived attempts to mimic other more established kinds of political psychology.

As a field of knowledge (for a detailed analysis, see Garzón, 1993, 1994, 1999), political psychology in Spain is a relatively new discipline. It began by attempting to fit in with already established notions of what political psychologists should be concerned with. At that time, its scientific and academic roots were to be found in the study of ideologies, political participation, and political violence. At least four separate stages can be identified in its evolution.

The initial stage was the establishment of *intellectual foundations*. The social theorists of the time, of whom Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset were the most prominent, based their political models of Spain on sociopsychological theories. Although none of them could be referred to as political psychologists, their political analyses of Spain and its international role were based on psychological explorations of both those in power and ordinary citizens. Their work in the field was not to be carried forward until after the 1950s, when the Spanish Civil War was several decades in the past and Franco's dictatorship had become relatively less harsh and intolerant.

The second stage was one of *academic political psychology*. In this stage, certain socially sensitive philosophers and psychologists drew together to formulate an academic psychological discipline in which the fundamental social concerns of the Spanish people were prominent. This stage coincides with the postwar era of the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these figures came from the world of sociology (Torregrosa), others belonged to the discipline of critical social psychology (Burillo), and others came from general psychology (Pinillos and Seoane). Those from general psychology are generally viewed as pivotal in developing a specific field of political psychology. Although central to these developments, the approaches of Pinillos and Seoane were quite different. Pinillos (1983, 1960) was concerned with the effects of the social order on the forming of personality, whereas Seoane (1982, 1994, 1998) sought to interpret the individual and cognitive psychology within the framework of shared and historical knowledge.

The third stage of *scientific political psychology* developed as a direct result of the previous one. It was characterized by the defining of its own area of investigation within which the different themes integrating Spanish political psychology were developed. The chief emphases included the study of ideologies, political participation, and political violence. In the political world, this stage runs parallel to the consolidation of democracy in Spain. During this stage, various geographical nuclei became clearly defined, with psychologists in various areas of

the country engaged in the sociopolitical needs of their respective regions. It was during this period that the first two books on political psychology were published. The first, *Psicología Política* (Seoane & Rodríguez, 1988), brought together in one volume the work of different teams of psychologists involved in traditional themes of political psychology. Although its contributors were Spanish authors, its contents go far beyond the specific reality of Spain, and it can be considered as the first handbook published in Spain. In 1990 Seoane published *Psicología Política de la Sociedad Contemporánea*, in which contributors drew together the central themes and authentic flavor of contemporary political psychology in Spain. It treated those issues that most clearly define and differentiate the Spanish work from endeavors in other countries.

As a fourth stage, an alternative to the scientific attitude began to gather strength in the 1990s. In the early part of this period we can identify a kind of *militant political psychology*, in the sense that it restored to the discipline a sense of social commitment. This stage has seen a refocusing and reorientation of the subject matter of political psychology toward social reform and political issues. The current generation of political psychologists (Dávila, Fouce, Gutiérrez, Lillo de la Cruz, & Martín, 1998) is attempting to reformulate the theoretical framework of the field and articulate the grounds for more committed and militant activity on the part of psychologists. Increasingly, academic work is focused on the local context of the different regional identities that make up Spain as a country of autonomous regions (Galicia, the Basque country, Catalonia, Andalusia, Valencia, Castille, and Leon). This latter movement sets the stage for the emerging view of political psychology as a resource.

### **Political Psychology as a Resource in the Spanish Context**

The view of political psychology as a resource in Spain has prevailed in part because of its reliance on contextually and analogically confronting the many realities that make up the Spanish experience. Political psychology had been considered by many to have dressed itself up in scientific clothing and attempted to hide its socially committed side. This was the only way to obtain academic and social recognition at that time. In the world of today, where this blind faith in scientific authority no longer exists, and where systematic and integrated knowledge as the source of applied knowledge has also been sidelined, a new attitude of trust in distributed practice has emerged with great vigor. In many respects, this is simply an extension of the democratization of knowledge (Tocqueville, 1840/1989). At the same time, resources are needed in order to relate across the diverse realities—religious, governmental, regional, political, and so on.

This emerging view was implicit in much earlier work. The intellectuals and thinkers of the pre-civil war years (1936–1939) developed an individual psychology (Unamuno) and politics as education (Ortega y Gasset) in an attempt to respond to significant issues that were affecting Spain at that time. Questions of whether

Spain could aspire to be a nation (a unified political and cultural project), whether to ally with France or Germany in its foreign policies, and whether liberalism or traditionalism should dominate the political structure were of enormous significance. These were not issues to which a strictly scientific orientation could be applied. Political values and committed action were essential. Later, with the delay in empowering a democratic culture, Pinillos (generation of 1952) and Seoane (1968) began to openly raise difficult issues for their time, such as the place of ideology and political participation in psychology (see Garzón, 1993).

However, when we propose that political psychology serve as a resource, we leave behind us the discourse of authors, manuals, and journals and instead immerse ourselves in concrete social realities. In short, we move beyond the insular nature of a discipline to pursue its dialogic relationships with the outside world. Similar proposals have been made before, for example by Gergen in his early work on psychology as history (1973) and later in his microsocial theory of knowledge (1989). Other works raised the same issues, as in Seoane's analysis (1998) of the role of political psychology in new societies and his analysis of new information technologies. Both of these authors, among others, clearly emphasize the crucial role that political psychology must now play, both within the world of psychology and in terms of its relationship with society.

This orientation gains further currency in light of internal transformations of science and the sociopolitical constitution of contemporary societies more generally. In the first instance, scientific and academic institutions are experiencing a transformation that challenges the traditional concept of disciplines and of the delimitation of the boundaries of academic knowledge. It is no longer feasible to talk of disciplines in an unambiguous way, because scientific knowledge can only be understood in terms of unbounded networks of knowledge. This is especially true in the world of social science, with its veritable spider's web of multiple and overlapping dialogues. In terms of sociopolitical change, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate out political process from social relations and institutions more generally. Politics, and of course political events, can no longer be seen strictly in terms of "government," "power," "leaders and ideologies," or "administration of resources." Politics now includes a far wider set of issues, and indeed it cannot be separated clearly from social life in general. Political process can be found not only within strictly political and labor organizations, but also within the family and in religious and altruistic organizations, academic institutions, and cultural traditions (Garzón, 1998). This politicization of personal and social life means that the old concept of the discipline has now become archaic, and a paradigm stressing the democratization and distribution of knowledge is required.

When these two changes are considered in tandem, we can understand political psychology as a resource or heuristic for connecting psychological deliberations with those of neighboring disciplines in the context of political action. Political psychology is thus a relational process functioning among the various fields of knowledge, between democratic society and the scientific community, with respect

to specific social issues. As a relational resource, it adopts different forms, giving rise to multiple and diverse political psychologies, depending on the specific influences of time, place, and generation. In this respect, we are confronted by an activity that (a) lacks a clearly defined objective, yet enjoys a wide framework of relationships; (b) lacks an exclusive reference to any one field of knowledge, yet interacts with all the social sciences; and (c) functions as a pragmatic activity, shaped by social concern and directed toward the interpretation of current political phenomena (Garzón, 1993).

At this stage it is essential to think about how this emerging view of political psychology can best be developed. Above all, we need to examine how it can be firmly grounded within a value system that is neither archaic nor obscure. Rather, this grounding should function as a creative solution to the challenge of a new scientific paradigm—a paradigm that emphasizes the democratization of knowledge, the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, and the broad distribution of information across networks. Legitimation for the new political psychology might derive, then, not from a hierarchically imposed value system (such as liberal humanism, liberation theology, religious fundamentalism, etc.), but from the horizontal participation of citizens, institutions, and interactive networks of social communication. From this perspective, the content and activity of political psychology would remain open and changing in relation to the relevant factors at any given time, including the role of its protagonists (academics, groups, and civil society) and the influence of geographical factors. In short, political psychology as a resource can best be considered as an ever-emerging and developing network of informed opinion, considered values, and relevant action.

### AUTHOR'S ADDRESS

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Adela Garzón Pérez, Avda. Blasco Ibanez, 119, 11-3, 46022-Valencia, Spain. E-mail: garzon@uv.es

### REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswick, E., Levinson, D. J. & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P., Miller, W., & Stokes, D. (1960). *The American voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Comte, A. (1934). *Curso de filosofía positiva*. Madrid: Aguilar. (Original work published 1830–42)
- Dávila, J., Fouce, G., Gutiérrez, L., Lillo de la Cruz, A., & Martín, E. (1998). La psicología política contemporánea [The contemporary political psychology]. *Psicología Política*, 17, 21–43.
- Dorna, A. (1994). Diagnostic de la société démocratique contemporaine, pour une psychologie politique pluridisciplinaire [Diagnosis of the contemporary democratic society, for a pluridisciplinary political psychology]. *Connexions* (no. 64), 75–91.
- Garzón, A. (1988). Psicología política y psicohistoria [Political psychology and psychohistory]. In J. Seoane & A. Rodríguez (Eds.), *Psicología política* [The political psychology] (pp. 279–305). Madrid: Pirámide.



- Garzón, A. (1993). Psicología política en España [Political psychology in Spain]. *Boletín de Psicología*, 39, 35–65.
- Garzón, A. (1994). Précurseurs et psychologues politiques en Espagne [Precursors and political psychologies in Spain]. *Connexions* (no. 64), 55–74.
- Garzón, A. (1998). Familismo y creencias políticas [Familism and political beliefs]. *Psicología Política*, 17, 101–128.
- Garzón, A. (1999). Psicología política en la España de las autonomías [Political psychology in the Spain of the autonomies]. *Psicología Política*, 19, 35–62.
- Gergen, K. J. (1973). Social psychology as history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 309–320.
- Gergen, K. J. (1989). Invitaciones al engaño. Un análisis microsocia. *Boletín de Psicología*, 22, 7–38.
- Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage.
- Hermann, M. (Ed.) (1986). *Political psychology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ibáñez, T. (1983). Los efectos políticos de la psicología social [The political effects of the social psychology]. *Cuadernos de Psicología*, 7(2), 95–106.
- Iyengar, S., & McGuire, W. J. (Eds.) (1993). *Explorations in political psychology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jimenez Burillo, F. (1996). Psicología política [Political psychology]. In J. L. Alvaro, A. Garrido & J. R. Torregrosa (Eds.), *Psicología Social Aplicada*. [Applied Social Psychology]. Madrid: McGraw Hill.
- Knutson, J. M. (Ed.) (1973). *Handbook of political psychology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McGuire, W. J. (1993). The poly-psy relationship. Three phases of a long affair. In S. Iyengar & W. J. McGuire (Eds.), *Explorations in political psychology* (pp. 9–35). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Montero, M. (1986). Political psychology in Latin America. In M. Hermann (Ed.), *Political psychology* (pp. 414–433). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ortega y Gasset, J. (1966). *Vieja y nueva política* [New and old politics], *en obras completas* (vol. 1). Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1972. (Original work published 1914)
- Ortega y Gasset, J. (1990). *La rebelión de la masas* [The rebellion of mass]. Madrid: Alianza Editorial. (Original work published 1930)
- Pinillos, J. L. (1960). *Preferencias nacionales de varios grupos universitarios* [National preferences in some groups of university]. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.
- Pinillos, J. L. (1983). *La personalidad humana y el orden social* [The human personality and the social order]. In J. L. Pinillos (Ed.), *La psicología y el hombre de hoy* (pp. 33–49). Mexico: Triuas. Paper presented at Escuela de Psicología de la Universidad Central de Venezuela.
- Sabucedo, J. M. (1996). *Psicología política* [Political psychology]. Madrid: Síntesis Psicología.
- Seoane, J. (1982). Psicología cognitiva y psicología del conocimiento [Cognitive psychology and psychology of knowledge]. *Boletín de Psicología*, 1, 27–40.
- Seoane, J. (Ed.) (1990). *Psicología política de la sociedad contemporánea*. Valencia: Promolibro.
- Seoane, J. (1994). El papel de la psicología política en las nuevas sociedades [The paper of the political psychology in the new societies]. *Psicología Política*, 9, 59–74.
- Seoane, J. (1995). Perspectivas sociales y políticas de la educación en el final de siglo [Social and political perspectives of the education in the century's end]. In C. Genovard et al. (Eds.), *Psicología de la instrucción III. Nuevas perspectivas* [Psychology of the instruction III. New perspectives] (pp. 41–86). Madrid: Síntesis.
- Seoane, J. (1998). Comparecencia ante la Comisión Especial sobre Redes Informáticas [appearance before the Special Commission on Computer Nets]. *Cortes Generales. Diario de Sesiones del Senado*, 3 de noviembre, VI Legislatura. Madrid, Núm. 351, pp. 2–13.

- Seoane, J., & Rodríguez, A. (Eds.) (1988). *Psicología política* [The political psychology]. Madrid: Pirámide.
- Spengler, O. (1983). *La decadencia de Occidente* (2 vols.). Madrid: Espasa-Calpe. (Original work published 1917)
- Stone, W. F. (1974). *The psychology of politics*. New York: Free Press.
- Stone, W. F. (1981). Political psychology: A Whig history. In S. L. Long (Ed.), *The handbook of political psychology* (vol. 1, pp. 1–67). New York: Plenum.
- Tocqueville, A. de (1989). *La Democracia en América* [Democracy in America] (2 vols.). Madrid: Aguilar. (Original work published 1835–40)
- Unamuno, M. (1998). *En torno al casticismo* [Around the casticism], *obras completas*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe. (Original work published 1895)