



Jean Blondel: One of the founding fathers of European political science

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Accepted: 1 December 2023
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Abstract

Jean Blondel's personal and scientific biography deserves to be illustrated, as it can in many ways also be an illustration of the laborious making of a genuinely European (though not only) political science from the ashes of World War 2, and the failures (uncertainties) of pre-WWII political science. Here it will briefly be recalled how an enthusiastic and innovative institution builder gained a central place in the making of the new European political science, and how Blondel coupled this with his tireless exploration of new fields of comparative politics, while being at the same time a generous mentor of PhD students and younger scholars and, for many, a great friend.

Keywords Jean Blondel · Democracy · European politics · Profession

To remember Jean Blondel is not just to remember an eminent scholar and a founding father of contemporary European political science, it is also to remember an ebullient personality with a genius for building human and academic relationships, for launching innovative projects, for opening new pathways. He was an uninhibited person who was always ready to break conventions and challenge established patterns, a scholar who was very much at the center of many important developments taking place in European political science when, after the Second World War, the time came for its reconstruction from the ashes of the first half of the century. He was not the only one to play a leading role in this endeavor but was undoubtedly a central figure, thanks to a rather unique combination of scientific prowess, breadth of interests and operational assiduity.

Blondel's biography was from the start unconventional and suggestive of his future efforts. A Frenchman, educated as expected at Sciences Po in Paris, Blondel soon "betrayed" his country (but never renounced his French citizenship) and opted for British academia. His rejection of the Algerian war after military service

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was most probably an important element behind this choice, by which he began to assert his “European citizenship” as prevailing over national allegiances. His strong support for European integration, in spite of its limitations and difficulties, would always be clear.

His first study devoted to Brazilian politics (Blondel 1957) and published after a field study, showed from the beginning Blondel’s deep interest in comparative politics and in a comparative politics that would not be confined to the developed North. This theme would return repeatedly in Blondel’s scientific career.

An innovative institution builder with a central place in the making of the new European political science

After graduating from Oxford’s St. Antony’s College, his doctoral degree and a first assignment to Keele University, Blondel rapidly became a respected academic figure and at the same time one of the new leading actors in the ongoing empirical renovation of British political science.

The creation of new universities, launched in the sixties by the British government to expand university education, offered interesting opportunities for people with innovative ideas. Asked to be the founding professor of the Department of Government of the new University of Essex which, guided by a visionary head, opened its doors in 1964, he used this position as a launching pad not only for his extraordinary personal career, but also for laying the ground for one of the most important and influential departments of political science in Europe. At the helm of a young and unconventional academic institution, not trapped by consolidated traditions, Blondel, with a team of young collaborators (Brian Barry, Ian Budge, Anthony King and others), could try his hand (and his imagination) at creating something rather new for the British and European academic scene. Here was an opportunity and Blondel did not let it slip from his grasp. The goal was to establish an institution of research and higher education that would learn from the most advanced American experiences (which Blondel had the opportunity to observe during a visiting fellowship at Yale’s Department of Political Science, where he could meet some of the leading figures of the ongoing behavioral revolution) and try to reimplant them in the European setting.

The broader importance of this first “creation” which soon became an example, a prototype for other universities in Europe, cannot be underestimated. Truly political science departments or institutes of the model we are now accustomed to, were almost non-existent in Britain and on the continent at that time. There were mainly individual scholars with their personal entourage. Essex, and what was being done there with its more team-oriented department, became for many people elsewhere an attraction, a trademark for a new political science.

Essex’s Department of Government under Blondel’s leadership was also soon to become the engine for a number of initiatives which went well beyond its borders. The first of these initiatives was the Methods Summer School launched in 1968 under the direction of Ian Budge (and with the support of the University of Michigan). It was particularly important in triggering an empirically and methodologically sophisticated



revolution in European political science. It soon became the place to go for young scholars from all over Europe who wanted to learn the new methods.

The second important creation with which Blondel eminently concurred, was the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) which was to progressively become the backbone infrastructure of European political science and promote, over the years, the strong Europeanization of the discipline. Blondel, together with other eminent scholars such as Hans Daalder, Serge Hurtig, Stein Rokkan, Richard Rose, and Rudolf Wildenmann, and with the crucial financial support of the Ford Foundation, managed to engineer in 1970 the establishment of the ECPR. Blondel was the first executive director and indefatigable engine of the new institution. Every European political scientist today takes for granted the existence of this institution. Its joint workshop sessions, general conferences, summer schools, journals, publications, etc., have been for years, and continue to be, the organizational support and meeting ground for a dense academic community which spans the whole of Europe but has extensions also elsewhere in the world. It was a true revolution from the existing landscape populated essentially by often parochial national associations. It was also innovative as compared to the main international association IPSA. The ECPR was conceived as an association of departments, and not of individuals, with an efficient central office ensuring the professional conduct of the association, methodological summer schools and the formula of joint sessions by which small groups of specialists would meet together for a few days and work around a common theme. These innovative aspects had an important fallout. The ECPR was not just the typical professional association promoting gathering events for its members, but a powerful engine for the transformation of the discipline, also becoming a symbol of the new "European space" that was coming to light in many forms during that period. The progressive expansion of the ECPR in Europe met the only serious obstacle in Russia which continued to prefer the IPSA.

After leaving his duties at Essex and the ECPR, Blondel moved to other horizons. The European University Institute in Fiesole was his new destination and a number of visiting professorships in Lille, Siena, Lüneburg, Colorado Springs, Pavia, Tokyo, etc. offered him many opportunities to teach and spread his ideas. His institution building energy did not vanish, however. In Siena he contributed to the launching of a new research center (CIRCaP) and of a taught PhD program in Comparative and European Politics. Then came another big project, the creation of an Asian Consortium for Political Research did not take off; unfortunately, there was not a university institute which could provide the organizational infrastructure for the project as it had been done by Essex and the availability of financial resources was also limited. Some important spillovers were however produced in the fields of interuniversity cooperation, research projects and publications. In this period Blondel also promoted cooperative research projects in Latin America for the study of presidential systems.



An untiring explorer of new fields of comparative politics: a generous mentor of PhD students and younger scholars

The fact that Blondel was so busy in institution building does not mean that he was less actively engaged in research. In fact, throughout his long life, he never ceased to pursue new goals in this field and to publish extensively.

There are different types of political scientists: some over the years concentrate most of their attention on a single theme on which they are able to progressively achieve important results. They play an important role in the discipline as they thoroughly refine some of the building blocks of our knowledge. Robert Dahl might be seen as an outstanding example of this type. Others prefer to open new research paths in different directions and stimulate academic circles to continue their exploration. Blondel could be placed somewhere in between these two types. If we look at his scholarly production from his dissertation on the politics and society of a Brazilian region, to the book on elections and parties in Britain, the many books on political leaders, those on Asian culture, to his final book on African presidents, we can appreciate his scientific curiosity at work on a variety of geographical areas and themes. This is not to say that he did not devote very serious efforts to the themes that he successively tackled. But he could not be pinned down to just one topic.

There were, however, two main preoccupations that guided as a *fil rouge* his varied research efforts. The first was the unrelenting urge to expand the geographical horizon of comparative studies. Blondel was deeply dissatisfied with the fact that comparative studies were, to a dominant extent, devoted to countries of the Atlantic area and that other parts of the world were rarely included or left mainly to the *domaines réservés* of country or area studies. Repeatedly during his lifetime he made vigorous efforts to expand the frontiers, to Latin America, to Asian countries and to African nations. The second preoccupation was the insufficient attention given to the upper strata of the political body: presidents, prime ministers, ministers. He saw in this the risk of a “sociological drift” in political science that would miss a crucial aspect of political life. That is why so much of his research work went into investigating “those who govern” and the institutional environment where they operate.

A glance at a string of his major scientific works enables us to delineate his research path. His dissertation work, based on field research in a Brazilian state, is a good and early testimony of his willingness to project his scientific explorations beyond the borders of the so-called developed world. He would show this predisposition throughout his academic life and especially with his final bold work on African leaders published when he was already ninety (Blondel 2019). Entering the British academic ranks, he could not avoid testing his skills with the crucial aspects of the United Kingdom’s political system. The highly successful book *Voters, Parties and Leaders* (1963) was one of his earliest attempts to bring a more methodologically sophisticated empirical analysis to a field that other academic circles were studying with more traditional approaches. The book aimed to go beyond a purely electoral book and explore more widely the “social



fabric of British political life” as the subtitle aptly indicated. It was considered an important breakthrough among country studies. Along these lines he could also not avoid turning his attention to his country of origin with *The Government of France* (1968a), which was to have many editions. Interestingly enough, his attention to his country would not be followed by other more in-depth studies and his audience in France was never comparable to that in other countries. After these two studies his works would almost always be of a comparative nature, starting from a successful textbook on comparative politics (*An Introduction to Comparative Government* 1969).

While European political science was in those years predominantly focused on parties and party systems and on electoral studies, Blondel, who had also contributed to this field with a significant article (Blondel 1968b), chose to explore a different path which he considered understudied. Over a good number of years, he would concentrate his work on those who govern and on the institutions of government. Of course, parties did not disappear from the picture but Blondel was convinced that there was something else beyond parties that could be captured by adopting a different point of view. This intuition was to become a connecting thread through an important number of subsequent research efforts. The first books on the heads of governments (*World Leaders* 1980), on ministers (*Government Ministers in the Contemporary World* 1985) and on political leadership (*Political Leadership: Toward a General Analysis* 1987) were based on wide-ranging collections of the available empirical data on the background, careers, and duration in office of executive politicians and explored the extent to which their influence on the machinery of the executive could be significant. These global comparative efforts were followed over the next decades by a series of collective books focusing sequentially on more limited geographical areas on the government institutions of European countries, as the places where parties but also individual personalities (PM and ministers) play the most important game of democratic regimes (*Cabinets in Western Europe* 1988; *The Profession of Government Ministers in Western Europe* 1991; *Party and Government: An Inquiry into the Relationship between Governments and Supporting Parties* 1996, *The Nature of Party Government. A Comparative European Perspective* 2000; *Cabinets in Eastern Europe* 2001).

After this “European parenthesis” linked also to the research opportunities offered by his affiliation with the European University Institute in Fiesole, Blondel felt the need to widen again the geographical and cultural horizons of his research work. This was done in two directions: exploring the comparability of East and South East Asian politics with western politics, and analyzing the peculiarities of presidential systems in the world including Latin America and Africa.

The first direction profited from his close collaboration with two colleagues from Japan and Australia, Takashi Inoguchi and Ian Marsh. The central focus was now on political culture: would the specificities of Asian values impede a comparison with western countries? Thanks to this collaboration, a wide public opinion survey was conducted in eighteen East and South East Asian and European countries and a series of books published. After a more general work (Marsh et al. 1999), other books analyzed in depth the rich treasure of information coming out of the survey (Blondel and Inoguchi 2008, 2012a and 2012b). The picture emerging from



the data shed light on the significant nuances which exist within both European and Asian political cultures and challenge the view that they are two compact and distant worlds which are not amenable to comparison. In fact, on a number of aspects that relate to national identity and pride, confidence in state authorities, and life satisfaction, Blondel and Inoguchi could find significant evidence that there are mixed Asian–European groups of countries rather than Asian versus European ones. This would make comparison with a more global scope much less improbable than often thought.

Following this fruitful “Asian immersion” Blondel returned to his long interest in political leadership. For this purpose, he launched a new general exploration of countries which he defined as “presidential republics” (Blondel 2015). Putting aside what he considered the too formalistic distinction between presidentialism and semi-presidentialism, the book proposes to consider under the same category all the systems where an individual figure—the president—enjoys a direct relationship with the electorate and has a leading role in policy making; while, ministers and even prime ministers (when they exist) are in a subordinate position. This arrangement, having become largely dominant in most parts of the world (with the exception of Europe where the cabinet model still prevails), would require, according to Blondel, a more systematic analysis. His book, combining an analysis both of the historical background and the more recent diffusion of this form of government in different parts of the world, was to have the function of opening the way to such a task. He then personally guided a collective book devoted to Latin American presidentialism (Alcantara et al. 2017). But his final contribution to the topic was his book on African presidents (Blondel 2019), an effort to shed further light on an area of the world where this form had become dominant and which had received insufficient attention.

In a strong parallel with his wide-ranging research efforts, Blondel never ceased to be a generous—but at the same time exacting—mentor of younger scholars and PhD students in whatever academic environment he was operating. Many of his books were edited together with younger scholars he had involved in his research projects, stimulated to pursue and develop his intuitions and to put to the test their methodological skills. With PhD students, and also undergraduate students, he was unrelenting in pushing them to explore unconventional perspectives, but always rigorous in asking them not to lose direct contact with the real life of politics and not to get lost in too abstract notions. In these activities, as in his institution building efforts, he retained his friendliness and propensity to establish warm and intense personal relations with other people of different ages, and different walks of life. He will be remembered by colleagues, disciples and friends for his humanity.

The main pieces of this Symposium are dedicated to highlighting the most important research themes explored by Blondel over the years but also to show how his contributions still resonate in more recent scientific developments. Pippa Norris in her highly articulated article focuses on the analysis of party systems; starting from the ground breaking contributions Blondel gave in the late 1960s to the ongoing scientific debate in this field she elaborates on the relationship between fragmentation and polarization as the two crucial dimensions of analysis of party systems. The piece by Ferdinand Müller Rommel and Michelangelo Vercesi is devoted to what was probably the most lasting and central theme among



the wide-ranging research explorations of Blondel, i.e., the study of government institutions and executive leaders. The article aptly shows the important contributions by Blondel and his associates and how they opened the way to, and still stimulate, current research efforts. Nicholas Cheeseman then elaborates on the importance but also the problems of an analysis of African presidentialism which was the last research effort of Blondel. The article puts the contribution by Blondel in the wider perspective of the most recent works on African politics and democratization.

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Siena within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

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