

PIOTR SWISTAK

## **The Curious Case of Formal Theory in Political Science: How Did It Emerge as a Discipline, Why Its Existence Is a Sign of a Failure, and Why the Science of Politics Is Not Possible Without It?**

**ABSTRACT.** American political science has evolved a subfield which is commonly referred to as *formal theory*. Political scientists identify themselves as specializing in formal theory, departments advertise faculty positions in formal theory and put together formal theory subfields that offer undergraduate and graduate curricula. The roots of the field can be traced to Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' message, however, seems to have been utterly ignored by the social science. William Riker's second launch of "Hobbesian advice", in 1950's and 60's, proved more successful and put the field of formal theory on the map of political science. Yet, the very existence of the formal theory field can be seen as the failure of both Hobbes and Riker. There seems to be a continuing need for teaching social scientists why they should construct a proper science and how they should do it. This paper is an attempt to meet this need. I believe that the future science of politics will have to follow in the footsteps of Hobbes and Riker. And so will other social sciences. My point in the paper is not new; the way I make it, is.

**KEYWORDS:** formal theory, axiomatic theory, formal theory field in political science.

### **1. Introduction**

The "formal theory" label used by political scientists has always struck me as odd. Possibly because I could not imagine a field of "formal theory" evolving, for instance, in physics. In fact, I do not know of any other discipline of science in which a form of a theory became a label for a field of inquiry. Clearly, the very