

Into the future with social sciences

Increasing violence, ageing, ethnic strife and global warming – these problems present the often misunderstood social sciences with a chance to prove their worth. But should they change first?

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It is not forbidden to dream of building a better world, which is by and large what the social sciences try to help us to do. How to make cities more harmonious, reduce crime rates, improve welfare, overcome racism, increase our wealth -- this is the stuff of social sciences. The trouble is that the findings of social sciences are often dismissed as being too theoretical, too ambitious or too unpalatable.

The methods of research are also often attacked for their lack of rigour, and critics are quick to point out that the people who make the important decisions pay little attention to what social scientists have to say anyway. This would change if the social sciences made themselves more relevant and ready for the society of the 21st century.

Social sciences began to take shape in the 19th century, but came into their own at the beginning of the 20th century, when a number of well-established disciplines, including economics, sociology, political science, history and anthropology really made their mark. Geography and psychology could be added to that list. However, only sociology, political science and economics have succeeded in consolidating their position in the social sciences mainstream. The others were virtually all marginalised. Moreover, powerful institutional barriers now separate the various disciplines.

Hardly the right atmosphere in which to grow and deal with the harsh criticism which the social sciences have come in for from many quarters, including governments and international commissions. Radical measures are now being suggested to turn things round, from how to award university chairs, to setting syllabi and raising funds.

The need for decompartmentalising and striking a new order in the relationship between the disciplines concerns all of the social sciences, though perhaps economics most of all. Only it has acquired a dominant position in management and public affairs. Some would say it has fallen under the sway of "unitary thinking", with little room for debate, for example, on the question of debt reduction or monetary tightness. Moreover, many people do not believe that economic science forms part of social sciences at all.

This is a somewhat problematic position to uphold, particularly as economic developments are largely determined by political, social and cultural factors. Yet, economists often have difficulty understanding or taking such factors into account. This has left economics exposed to attack, for example, over its prescriptions for development and its analysis of events, such as the causes of the Asian crisis. To many, economics relies too heavily on hypothetical and sometimes unrealistic assumptions.

It seems clear that to explore the socio-cultural foundations of economies rigorously and methodically, one must draw on the other social sciences. Take anthropology, for example. It is a discipline which can attempt to explain the influence of value systems, institutions, family structures and even religious backgrounds on the behaviour of individuals. But for many years, anthropology and its related offshoot of ethnology were confined to the study of exotic societies. However, it can also throw light on the functioning, if not the future, of our own societies.

So does that mean it is high time to give fuller backing to the study of an anthropology of contemporary societies? Probably yes. The discipline has not only begun to acquire academic legitimacy, it has already attracted the serious attention of businesses eager for a detailed understanding of the behaviour of households, investors and the like. This is particularly true of multinational enterprises dealing with cross-cultural operations. A survey commissioned by IBM in the 1970s in over 60 countries where the company had subsidiaries is a perfect example of this. Many surveys since then have highlighted the influence on management of socio-cultural factors, such as the degree of individualism, control over uncertainty and attention to hierarchical structures and gender balance in employees' behaviour.

Apart from the multi-disciplinary qualities of the social sciences themselves, there is also the proposition of a closer relationship between the social sciences and natural sciences. There is already an overlap as a result of what is happening in the development of neuro-sciences: for example, research centres in this discipline have biologists, doctors, psychologists, sociologists, mathematicians and philosophers working closely together. Another example features the quality of the environment, the availability of natural resources, and even the productivity of marine environments: all are strongly influenced by human, or anthropogenic, factors. Now, world-wide programmes conducted in fields such as the study of global warming bring researchers in natural and human sciences together at the same table. There is no question that the demand for people who have been well trained in both types of science will increase from now on, and academic programmes will have to be introduced to meet this need.

Governments have a sense of how social sciences can help in the management of societies. They are also relying increasingly on the social sciences to deal with particular problems they are now facing. The UK government runs research projects on young people in urban environments and the findings of these studies have had a powerful influence on the design of government programmes for combating social disintegration, exclusion and unemployment.

It would not be foolhardy to suggest that the research helped to forge the climate of opinion that marked the 1997 general elections.

Still, the circumstances in which the social sciences have been integrated into political debate vary from country to country, although numerous recent initiatives have been influenced by a desire to bring researchers and users closer together. The Canadian government has, for example, set up a national network of centres for research into issues like immigration, with the close co-operation of local authorities, immigration services and other concerned bodies.

Generally speaking, the social sciences will wield more influence in the management of public affairs and will find their proper role when the right conditions exist for democratic and informed

debate at every level, whether national or local. Currently, dialogue between social science researchers and "society" all too often takes the form of one-way lecturing, with researchers given little opportunity for interaction with social groups. Sweden has acted on this by recently launching an important programme that involves the social sciences in the question of sustainable development, and which expressly provides for in-depth consultations between researchers and civil society.

IT can make a difference

There is every reason to believe that social sciences will be transformed -- maybe more so than natural sciences -- by advances in information technology and the ability to collect, process, stock and disseminate enormous quantities of data. It is beginning to be possible to link existing data bases in many fields in different countries, and to carry out large-scale, integrated, comparative analyses. Huge surveys can now be conducted on an extensive range of subjects on the Internet, which is clearly helpful in studying the perceptions and behaviour of a wide variety of people. And IT has opened up the possibility of working in virtual laboratories that link up large numbers of research teams on a worldwide network.

This is no technological fantasy of the social scientist.

Through the National Science Foundation, the US government has already instituted experimental initiatives in several fields. For example, a virtual research centre on violence has been set up to collate and supply information from dozens of researchers in some 20 institutes working in all disciplines from psychology and criminology to economics, biology and statistics. In some ways, the potential technology holds for the social sciences can be compared to the effect it has had on climatology. A few decades ago climatology relied on information that was provided haphazardly and intermittently by observatories scattered round the world. Now, with the use of satellites, our understanding and forecasting of climatic phenomena has improved immeasurably.

So can social sciences bounce back and assert themselves in the 21st century? We will probably not be able to tell for a few decades, since the ways in which societies analyse themselves develop very slowly. After all, the social sciences are rarely given to sudden discoveries and headline breakthroughs like some other sciences. What is more, social sciences may continue to face the stout resistance of established institutions defending their own territory and opposing innovation and change. Could it be that society, which by definition seeks stability, has an inbuilt resistance towards indulging in any form of self-analysis? Few people have an appetite for hard truths. But perhaps in the information age and in the dematerialised economy of the knowledge world, all that could change. Perhaps society will discover a pressing need to know itself much better, if only to survive. Social sciences will then be very much in demand.

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Note: Two seminars on the future of social sciences are being organised by the OECD in the year ahead to focus on the question of social sciences, one on large-scale infrastructure for the social sciences (Ottawa, autumn 1999), a second on the interdisciplinarity of social sciences (Bruges, spring 2000).

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