Social Sciences

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Social Sciences: A Dying Fire

BY

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Contents

Praise for *Social Sciences: A Dying Fire*

'The social sciences are caught in an internecine web of internal debates, making the enterprise largely irrelevant to the vast majority of human life. This fact is brilliantly captured in *A Dying Fire,* in which Professor Kléber Ghimire insightfully describes the causes and consequences of the social sciences' collective navel-gazing. Yet he does so not as a radical, eclectic project, but as an attempt to generate critical thinking essential to ensure continued relevance of these fields of study. De-centering Europe and North America is a vital step toward re-centering the value of the social sciences.'

Matthew F. Filner, Professor of Political Science and
Faculty Association President, Metropolitan State University,
Minnesota, USA.

'This book digs deep in the history of social sciences and critically assesses their present uncertain positions. Its' especially important contributions – and cannot be found easily elsewhere – are the reflections and analysis of the social sciences in Asian universities.'

Vesselin Popovski, Professor of Law and Vice Dean,
O.P. Jindal Global University,
Haryana, India.

'This is a highly original interdisciplinary critique of social sciences. The book is most interesting and important for academics, students or anyone who want to rethink about the current nature of social sciences' learning.'

Xiaoyuan Shang, Professor of Social Policy,
Beijing Normal University, China.

'This book persuasively explains why the social sciences should move beyond the narrow ideas of scientism, empiricism and professionalism toward a broader concept of learning and comprehensive thinking, and further conveys astoundingly deep knowledge about the commonalities and differences in the notion of learnedness and educational traditions of Western and Asian societies.'

Jin-Wook Shin, Professor of Sociology,
Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea.

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Chapter 1

Introducing the Key Elements of Crisis

> Relying on our own knowledge and not making use of the knowledge of others, we have difficulty understanding the multifarious affairs of the world … All people have something they individually have gotten and things they have learned for themselves. Among ten people they have the knowledge of ten. Among one hundred people they have the knowledge of a hundred. It is good to take and use the strengths of others. No matter how talented the person, in the past or the present, it is difficult for him to know everything himself.
>
> Ekken Kaibara (1630–1714), Japanese neo-Confucian philosopher.[1]

Long-term historical analyses indicate discontinuities, bounces and new evolutions in cultural and intellectual attainments in human societies. The rise of Europe, 'a small cape of the Asian continent', to paraphrase the French poet and philosophical writer Paul Valéry has over the last two centuries or so been an unparalleled happening in modernisation and economic growth, reshaping social conditions internally (together with its offshoot countries, namely the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), but also markedly affecting the structure and dynamism of many other human societies. But is not this precisely one of such variable historical outcomes that occurred in Europe and that the past 'gains' may be difficult to sustain in the face of deep-rooted internal ambiguities within this evolution and new realities of globalised markets, technology, demographic mobilities, rising levels of communication and cultural exchanges?

Indeed, Valéry points out that even the greatest achievements of the past civilisations have proved 'perishable by accident' (e.g. a major war) and that 'Europe of 1914' had already 'reached the limits of modernisation'. It is here he recalls that Europe is only a small extension of Asia with limited natural resources, but what is, nevertheless, 'most precious' to him is the 'quality of man' and the 'European

[1]Kaibara, Ekken, *Yamato Zokkun* (Precepts for Daily Life in Japan) translated and presented in Tucker (Kaibara, 1989, p. 219).

Social Sciences: A Dying Fire, 1–36

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mind', thereby making Europe 'the precious part of the earthly universe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body' (Valéry, 1919, pp. 331–337). According to this line of reasoning, what counts are not just the European successes in education, technology, science, literature, arts and civility, but also its select standing among different population groups and cultures. But can these archetypical, preconceived enlightenment and self-importance accounts endure indefinitely? Clearly, many illustrious ideas produced in Europe (later together with North America), some of which are seemingly assumed to be universal, are now openly questioned, even considered suspect.

What interests us the most in this work is the role and positioning of today's social sciences in this historical occurring. The essential character of the social sciences, developed during the nineteenth century, for the most part, is that they are born, so as to say, 'out of the European womb', at the height of Europe's legend building. This has ipso facto conditioned social sciences how they are structured, fostered, as well as in their ability to create and transfer a thorough and unbiased social knowledge. Considering this, it can perfectly be assumed that 'the valet would be serving his master', but what is significant is that even among intellectuals with most probing and daring ideas and observations, the European historical experience has remained the prime frame of reference, as if, ultimately, the long and diverse paths and realisations of other human societies mattered little. Thus, voluntarily or involuntarily, the function of the social sciences has been to partake in these grand European characterisations, with the conception of the world being considerably narrowed, if not completely distorted. What is more troublesome in this regard is that this state of affairs continues to persist today and even thriving in certain cases. Owing to this, the historical or contextual setting is considered in this book to be as an element of central importance to illustrating the various problems and ambiguities currently facing the social sciences, including their future evolution.

There is another aspect forming a core area of discussion in this work. This has to do with the issue of the social sciences seeking to invent their own internal narratives, with a variety of incongruous results. More specifically, this has to do with the social sciences' pledge of creating irrefutable knowledge in diverse fields of concern. For achieving this goal, the social sciences have moved towards wilful appropriation of the natural sciences' fundamental research methods so as to imply that social matters can be fully ascertained though experimentation and quantification. One major consequence of this is the social sciences' across-the-board reliance on empiricism, an approach scarcely suited to investigating complex and ever-changing social circumstances and human conditions, struggles, desires, intelligence and idiocy. By the same token, it is asserted that the social sciences techniques used for undertaking research and expertise activities can help formulate conscientious social policies in different contexts. The social sciences' pledges appear debatable in these areas, if anything, the scope of research and expertise activities being concentrated on selective, timely or marketable topics. It is thus hardly necessary to say that these sorts of evolutions are more damaging than expedient to any serious attempts towards building a solid knowledge base for social learning, innovative research and intellectual pursuits.

Equally problematical feature, considered extensively in this research, is the complexities arising from the ways the social sciences have developed themselves inside of the university system. Apart from having to operate under a constricted, divided and rambling logic of faculties and departments, the social sciences remain perpetually exposed to disciplinary fights and priority settings inside the university, especially in an era when scientific matters usually receive the most attention. In addition to this, universities, principally in the Western world (bloated during the period of economic growth, a high demand for mass education and rather a generous public funding), affected greatly by cuts in government funding and the sway of neoliberal economic principles, remain very keen in developing carefully focussed occupation-oriented subjects, tailor-made research and expertise activities as a way of maintaining their educational capacity and reputation (now also for the purpose of raising their standing in national or world university rankings and new internationalisation quests). Increasingly, economic rationality and business, enterprise-like mentality take precedence over the traditional role of universities as public good institutions providing basic higher education to young people and promoting the value of disinterested scholarly research and writings. These developments have many direct and indirect implications for the functioning and creativity of the social sciences (and the humanities), resulting in the end their widespread neglect.

These various troubles and challenges faced by the social sciences are spelled out, illustrated and analysed in the following sections and chapters. Several points stated above in 'bulk' need evidently to be dissected and nuanced, including the issues of diversities within the university world, the ability of particular fields of learning to adapt to changing circumstances and the criticisms emitted by individual academics and scholarly groups on the internal coherence and working of the social sciences. Nevertheless, we can already see that the social sciences do not have a clear and confident demeanour venturing out with determination in creating and sharing rigorous and accurate social knowledge as according to their initial spirit. The wonderful day with plenty of success in these areas that they imagined is not there; well in contrast, they are increasingly 'shaken from their roots and branches'. In other words, the social sciences today are in a deep state of fragility, if not in a situation of absolute 'crisis'.

A statement of this nature may appear somewhat brusque to some readers. Even so, it will be accepted that an initial 'colour' of reasoning is announced from the outset. In any event, the statement is in no way intended to create a sensation of certain effects. Nor is this meant to exhibit any excessive enthusiasm claiming to produce exceptional theories, new methods or analyses. The ambition of this work is rather modest: principally, it consists of saying that we can no longer count on the social sciences as they currently exist to be the full reservoir of knowledge, learning and societal changes. Not only may an epoch of their certain splendour have worn out, but also an acutely uncertain situation may lay before them. These various complexities, weaknesses and ominous consequences, defined in sum as 'crisis', merit close scrutiny, understanding and reflection.

Of course, it is often customary among intellectuals to speak of crises of diverse genres, including the area of knowledge production and its wider significance.

René Descartes, a forerunner of the Western Enlightenment and rationalism in the first-half of seventeenth century, at a time when many of the presently known social science disciplines were at a rudimentary state, expressed disillusionment that the existing body of human knowledge was being confined merely to 'book learning', 'removed from common sense' away from any concrete 'example and custom'[2] (Descartes, 1998, pp. 6–7). Others suggest that, until the end of the eighteenth century, the university system in Europe as a source of knowledge creation and transfer was in a state of extreme deterioration because of the lack of renovation in faculty, the religious in-fighting, the small number of students and the elitist nature of teaching. Moreover, obliged to follow the orthodoxy of the Church or the sovereign's instructions or whims, faculties lacked academic freedom and autonomy; in actual fact, scores of powerful innovative ideas of the time were born largely outside the universities: the renewal of philosophy, exegesis and theology in the sixteenth century, the rise of science, modern law and the Enlightenment intellectual movement during eighteenth century (Charle & Verger, 2007, p. 53). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when several branches of the social sciences came into existence and were rapidly structuralised, enjoying occasionally enhanced capacity and wider influence, their intent and propensity to increase a fuller body of social knowledge was constantly questioned.

As with the more recent periods, the notion of crisis is commonly used in relation to the declining quality of higher education in numerous fields such as the social sciences and the humanities, chiefly due to reductions in public funding. This is certainly true, but there are many other interrelated factors behind this outcome, as the subsequent discussion would seek to elucidate. These include notably the domination of liberal economic ethos within the university system, vogue in university rankings and, most of all, the drifting away of universities from their original pedagogical task giving preference to pecuniary-oriented research and expertise activities. Besides, certain authors such as Michel Wieviorka have indicated that there is the disciplinary crisis internal to the humanities and the social sciences, as 'theoretical tools and orientations of thirty-five or forty years ago have been de-structured and are generally in crisis'. He points out that new challenges have emerged in dealing with the complex issues of globalisation, social engagements of researchers and new forms of social conflicts, mechanisms of domination and so forth (Wieviorka, 2007a, pp. 9–12).

Undeniably, we can only agree with the above diagnostics regarding the evolution in contemporary societies and the challenges facing the social sciences. But is it only in their latest orientations that the social sciences encounter uncertainties? On the contrary, one may well argue that the social sciences find themselves in a most intricate situation in relation to their very structure and foci of functioning. In addition to this, unlike what Michel Wieviorka evokes, the social sciences have accumulated many theoretical and methodological complications from the very start, not just over the past 35 or 40 years. The objective of this study is to

[2]By 'custom', he is meaning the cultural context of knowledge.

explicate and carefully examine the historical and current context of these various aspects involving the social sciences.

So, what are some of the most distinctive features of the crisis characterising the social sciences? Can a crisis of this deep-rooted and extremely wide-ranging nature be delimitated to a few specific areas? Can the social sciences diverse dilemmas be reduced to the feature of crisis alone? After all, cannot this be repaired? What are the analytical, methodological and reflective principles or approaches that may be utilised to explore these critical questions?

This is an essay in which the author is motivated to employ a more fluid, subjective style drawing on his proper experiences (multidisciplinary academic training and teaching, heading of the social sciences department, research networks going from the social to the natural sciences) and refraining from citing innumerable standard theories or authors. But how convincing can these forms of individual knowledge or familiarities be in scientific writings and analyses? The reader would have remarked that, without making references to certain authors or their views, just announcing the basic problematic in the above introductory paragraphs would have been pretty arduous. Pierre Bourdieu describes this dilemma very perceptively, saying that as much he dislikes making systematic mention of the 'founding fathers', as much he finds their books and ideas irresistible, which are in the end 'like the air we breathe, is everywhere and nowhere' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 292). He believes that one way to avoid excessive dependence on founding fathers or theories is to 'reconstruct' a given 'reality' in an immersed manner so as to be able to better grasp what is actually 'visible', 'sensible' and 'concrete' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 14).

While recognising these conceptual and methodological difficulties, the principle preoccupation at this stage is how to expand comprehension and scholarly curiosity on the topic surrounding the present nature and forms of crisis facing the social sciences. A number of essential elements, at times mutually connected, should be underscored here.

The Pretension of Being A 'Science' and its Consequences

All branches of learning whether the natural sciences, the humanities or the social sciences have ambitions to expand the existing pool of knowledge. But the interpretations can vary a great deal as to what the contour of this knowledge is and how it should be produced and transmitted. Interpretations can also vary on what is a true or useful knowledge. As far as the social sciences are concerned, the exercise is often complicated because of their wobbly epistemological and methodological positioning. By and large, the social sciences remain rather weak in their attempt to become a proving source of knowledge production and learning, despite their frequent optimistic appearance or assertions.

The Trouble of a Term

The social sciences' misadventure began very early, if truth be told, from their founding. This has to do with the adoption of the term 'science'. In seeking to emulate the natural sciences, various fields of social studies began to incorporate

the word science both in their titles and in their investigative methods. Sociology is a good example here, originally designated by Auguste Comte (early father of Western sociology) as 'social physics' along the logic of physics as a 'complementary' element to the natural sciences (Comte, 1934, pp. 12–13). In an analogous manner, the early economic theories aimed at incorporating various perspectives from biology in order to advance new metaphorical classifications or theories. Take, for example, *The Fable of Bees* of Bernard Mandeville, which attempts to explain in a ludic and incisive manner how bees, like the humans, motivated by avidity, egoism and personal satisfaction in their individual behaviour and action, end up producing important gain for common usefulness (Mandeville, 1957, pp. 17–37). This book became the cornerstone of Adam Smith's powerful economic theory of invisible hands. Similarly, Robert Malthus's demographic and economic analyses heavily drew insights from the Darwinian theory of biological evolution. As well as biology, physics or chemistry (owing to the supposed regularities or universal nature of their findings) became the common object of fascination and reproduction in economics, while suggesting that this latter area of study and analysis was plainly capable of producing truthful and valid knowledge expressed in the form of 'laws' like in the natural sciences (such as the 'law of demand and supply', the 'law of marginal utility', the 'law of diminishing return', etc.). However, it is clear that human actions, aspirations and relations are constantly mutable phenomena; it is thus impossible to reduce them to any explicit experimentation criteria.[3] Notwithstanding, economic studies ordinarily counted towards becoming a field of scientific knowledge, with the Nobel Prize committee formally naming it as and conferring the award to 'economic sciences' and many economics faculties and journals eagerly choosing to use the same expression.

Among these diverse domains of learning seeking to replicate the natural sciences, the case of political sciences is no doubt the most abusive. How can a field of education that is concerned with thought, ideology, political expressions and conflicts, factors endlessly fluctuating and abstruse possibly be based on law-like controlled methods applied within the natural sciences? Can for the reason that certain attempts are made to integrate comparative approaches, statistical variables or case studies make political studies a 'political science'? Surely not.

There has been a widespread tendency to add the tag of 'science' expecting notability. Even the disciplines most unlikely to go with this logic are found to be adding the term science to their names, such as human sciences, historical sciences, legal sciences, and so forth.

On the other hand, certain other fields of study such as psychology aspired to become no less than a natural science itself. Sigmund Freud, for example, attempted to promote psychology as part of the natural sciences and felt it 'as a gross injustice' when it was not treated as such (Menand, 2018, p. 26). But the difficulty is that this discipline deals essentially with individual or group outlooks, emotions, attitudes, biases and interests, as well as their resourcefulness that are neither explicit nor

[3]Various authors suggest that economic studies are apt to indicating certain tendencies, but can never hope to establish universal laws (Guerrien, 2004, pp. 100–103).

stable. Presumably, certain quantities of systematic data may be created through clinical studies or neuro-cognitive observations, but the results can never be considered unequivocal or absolute. It is not only psychology, but also disciplines like demography (proclaimed at times to be demographic science), biology, cognitive studies and geography, with considerable links to human or social attributes have preferred to realign themselves with the natural sciences in search of prestige and greater recognition.

The word 'science' is typically viewed as espousing well-defined research methods and generating accurate knowledge. Yet, many scientific techniques and explanations are derived from confined laboratory research and limited sample size, thereby making wider generalisation frequently hazardous. Similarly, any categorisation of a selected natural phenomenon, the formulation of a hypothesis and the methods of observation and experimentation commonly employed within the natural sciences leave out many essential segments of the subject matter considered. Characteristically, the natural sciences are able to study a selected phenomenon basically at a fixed time along with a few number of scenarios. Under these circumstances, the results emanating from its experimental or empirical inferences can at best be fragmentary; consequently, a complete 'truth' that is thought to arise from this exercise stands out to be quite precarious. Furthermore, many past scientific theories have tended to be constantly overturned by new research work. For example, in physics, the theories of thermodynamics and electrodynamics developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been proven wrong or incomplete with the breakthrough in quantum theory in the early twentieth century; today, new research on the property, speed or trajectory of light has questioned the very foundation of many these theories, including that of Einstein's theory of relativity. Owing to this situation, should the natural sciences be taken as necessarily a basic guiding benchmark in observing social and human realities?

In view of this, certain authors such as Bent Flyvbjerg have suggested that employing the natural sciences methods in a mechanical fashion may in fact be 'an obstacle to good results' in social research and analyses. He writes:

> […] the rule-based, rational mode of thinking generally constitutes an obstacle to good results, not because rules and rationality are problematic in themselves, but because the rational perspective has been elevated from being necessary to being sufficient, even exclusive. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 24)

The rules and rationality can also be problematic in themselves, especially when a rigid model of investigation is followed centring on a single factor or factors and that the key findings are based on a restricted set of statistics. Adapting to this fixed and deficient model can be vastly constraining for social sciences observation, with the evident risk that ensuing findings become weak and circumstantial. At times, they may well prove erroneous. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with focussing on a unit with the goal of generating more exact information as well as to gaining deeper understanding of the topic. However, unlike the natural sciences, the social

sciences must combine unit-based or localised factors with that of a wider, holistic observation so that the ascertained facts or insights can be considered from multiples angles, including their horizontal and vertical effects. By way of elucidating how natural sciences methods remain insufficient and, in some cases, entirely ill adapted to social sciences inquiries, let us briefly consider the following two vital notions: social 'structure' and 'processes', stemming from sociology, in particular, and the social sciences and the various branches of the humanities, in general.

It is a matter of plain truth that any comprehensive attempt to create knowledge on societal changes, needs or aspirations, the social sciences need to bring together the facets of both structure and processes that govern the conditions and evolutions of human societies. In the event that the natural sciences investigative methods are followed in their strict sense of the term, such an attempt is likely to face an acute obstacle in grasping the true meaning and manifestation of these notions. Regarding the conception of social structure, it is true that natural science methods may be useful to some extent in studying or testing certain elements of a particular structure at a given time and place. But as soon as we accept the idea that that all structures are of a complex or multilayer nature, the applying of natural science methods becomes largely a futile endeavour. Indeed, the Latin etymological origin of the word structura denoting how a building is typically constructed, comprising numerous essential components (foundation, walls, roof as well as doors and windows) illustrates the marked importance of relationships and dependence between different constituents in a single unit, a conception that was refined by theoreticians on structuralism (notably Claude Lévi-Strauss) to interpret the individual relationships, often implicit, within existing ethnic or social organisations. The chief methodological challenge is hence how to explain the principal segments involved as well as the whole of the structure that is mutually interconnected.

The notion of social processes stands out to be even more problematic, given its constantly changing nature. In some ways, a social phenomenon is necessarily variable in its configuration and relations to wider constituents or occurrences, depending upon the prevailing conditions, time and space. The experimental observation methods derived from the natural sciences cannot deal with this variability and the wider nature of things involved. Unlike the law of nature, social processes are marked by great many diversities and irregularities, thus difficult to grasp or come to irrefutable conclusions. At the same time, any convincing quest for new knowledge on the varying circumstances of human societies would inescapably need to accommodate multiple changeable variables in human behaviours, actions, hierarchies, power, conflicts and alignments, including wider events induced by cultural changes, biological reproductions and the physical environment. This calls for embracing a more open, dynamic method going beyond static and inflexible laboratory tests and empirical deductions employed in natural sciences investigations.

Creating Knowledge on Values

Another aspect that has a direct implication on the production of social knowledge is the way in which the issue of ethics is taken into consideration. Aristotle, who has greatly influenced Western scientific thought, divides knowledge in three