Brewer, John D. "What is Social Science?." *The Public Value of the Social Sciences: An Interpretative Essay*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 19–52. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472545121.ch-001>>.

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What is Social Science?

Introduction

I see the social sciences, for all their obvious differences in content, approach and methodology, as united in two senses. First, they have a shared subject matter (which I call the social nature of culture, the market and the state). This permits huge variety in the way they each approach and tackle this subject matter and what they focus on. Secondly, they have a common public value that derives from this subject matter. Two things follow for the way I construct my argument. While disciplines have historically contingent boundaries and are obviously shaped by the conversations that take place across them, the social sciences have an essential, generic nature; and their public value is a common denominator. Focusing on their public value serves to demonstrate this essential unity. My later description of the normative public value of social science, as I call it, is, therefore, premised on a view of their common character. This chapter is devoted to defining this generic quality.

This is a difficult argument, given that specialization and professionalization in the twentieth century have destroyed any sense of generic unity among the separate social sciences and turned them against one another. Many economists, for example, think they are the only social science that is scientific, and those prejudicial to economics think it too dismal a failure to be considered a social science.¹ However, in this chapter, I venture to outline what I consider to be the generic nature of social science.

¹ In a personal communication with the author David Byrne was blunt: 'Basically I think you have a real problem in trying to assert the public value of the social sciences on behalf of the social sciences as a whole because their whole methodological and problematic bases are often incompatible. For example, while Steuer whom you quote more than once asserts that economics is the only real social science, I would say contemporary mathematical neo-classical economics is utterly unscientific since it is based on a deductive development from manifestly false premises and has no empirical foundation whatsoever' (dated 21 April 2012). These views are expanded in his book *Applying Social Science* (Byrne 2011).

It is necessary to explain that I develop this working definition of generic social science as I go along, building up to a definition incrementally, arriving fully only at the end of the chapter. I am not working backwards in this chapter, unpicking a definition stated categorically at the beginning, since I think the general reader unfamiliar with the idea of social science appreciates going forwards as each block is built on bit by bit. I will conclude by dealing with the issue of disciplinarity and disciplinary closure, by which I mean the tendency for the separate social sciences to erect fences between one another, marking off each other as different and distinct. Disciplinary closure is about emphasizing dissimilarities and it is necessary that we dismantle these fences before we can build the new public social science that is premised on my generic definition of social science.

Two problems in particular arise from disciplinarity for a generic definition of social science. First, the very meaning of the word 'social' has become subject to disciplinary closure, where it is now closely identified with the subject matter and domain of sociology to the point that it complicates our sense of what generic social science is. We, therefore, need to rescue the concept of society from sociology. Secondly, so difficult is it to define social science that people resort to listing the separate subjects within the field. There is no sense of the generic features of this branch of scientific study; it is what its separate subjects do. This sort of definition is particularly inadequate if we are to advance the idea of a new public social science that has a special and unique public value. Therefore, we must build up to such a definition by first deconstructing what is 'social' and 'science' about social science.

What is 'social' about social science?

Some august bodies connected to the social sciences shy away of trying to define them or resort to rather tepid common denominators. The United Kingdom's Academy of Social Sciences, for example, takes it so for granted what the social sciences are that it does not define them on its website (<http://www.acss.org.uk/>). Neither does the US Social Science Research Council on its website (<http://www.ssrc.org/>).² The worst cases of this oversight are the

² Consulted 25 October 2011.

International Social Science Council, whose 2010 *World Social Science Report* (UNESCO 2010: 3) considers that it constitutes merely the professional associations affiliated to it, and the Commission on the Social Sciences, an *ad hoc* body set up by the Academy of Social Sciences at the new millennium to report on the state of social science in Britain, which described social science as a misnomer given the divergences between the separate disciplines (2003: 6), although it went on to define it as ‘disciplined curiosity about societies in which we live’ (2003: 32).

Those tempted to define social science agree around the notion that it is the scientific study of society, although this is variously worded. In its pioneering Foundation Module in Social Sciences, the Open University in the United Kingdom, for example, defined social science as the study of society, justifying a module on general social science on the grounds that society provoked such a broad range of questions that no one discipline could possibly answer them all (Porter 1981: 3). Perhaps the definition used by the ESRC is the most appropriate.

Social science is, in its broadest sense, the study of society and the manner in which people behave and influence the world around us. Some social scientists argue that no single definition can cover such a broad range of academic disciplines. Instead, they simply define the social sciences by listing the subjects they include. The main social science disciplines include: anthropology, communication, criminology, cultural studies, economics, human geography, linguistics, public law, political science, psychology, sociology, development studies.³

Such a response is the common one: social science is what social scientists do in their separate disciplines. This will not suffice here. If what is ‘social’ about the social sciences is that their field of enquiry is society, we need to know first what society is.

The ESRC’s change of name from the Social Science Research Council in 1983, under a Conservative government hostile to social science, reflects the storm about the term ‘science’ when applied to society, but the term ‘society’ itself is controversial. It is particularly important to disabuse readers of the view that society does not exist, that only individuals are real. This is what philosophers call a ‘category mistake’ (which Gilbert Ryle, the Oxford

³ ESRC website (www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/what-we-do/what-is.aspx), consulted 10 October 2011.

philosopher used to illustrate by contrasting Oxford University's Colleges with Oxford University as a collectivity; in seeing the former, we see the latter: what differs is simply that nature of the category). Society *is* real and without it individuals could not exist, let alone function; people are, to borrow the title of W. G. Runciman's introduction to social science (1999), 'a very social animal'.

Society consists of individuals, groups and institutions. Individuals are not its basic unit; and groups and institutions are as tangible as people. Therefore, society is more than the aggregation of all the interactions of the people who comprise it. This was recognized even in early social psychology. James Mickle Williams, for example, wrote that the 'social mind', as he called it, exercised a dominant influence over individuals' minds (1920: 442), a view prevalent in American social psychology, in people such as Cooley, and in early British psychology, notably William McDougall – who went on to work and live in the United States – as well as social theorists like Hobhouse.⁴ An example can illustrate this point. The social significance of multimillions of people honouring the Armistice silence at 11 o'clock on the 11th day of the 11th month each year is a property of a collectivity different in kind from the motivations of each person on the day. Each person has their own motive for participating, but their joint actions have a collective significance that transcends each individual. The event draws on ideas about the nation and culture, and points to shared beliefs across national and cultural boundaries, it evokes such things as national narratives of honour and sacrifice, it connects generations across time and space, the long-since dead with present and future generations, and it involves collective rituals as much as individual emotional responses, collective behaviour as well as personal action. That is to say, people are not islands unto themselves, living in isolated and separate worlds inhabited only by themselves as single individuals. Individuals live, work and behave within groups; people cannot exist without each other in groups.

This is not to say that social science only studies groups, as suggested by the Mass Observation organization in 1937 when it wrote 'collective habits

⁴ McDougall wrote a text in 1908 entitled *An Introduction to Social Psychology* in the same year as the American E. A. Ross published his text with the title *Social Psychology*. I owe to John Kremer the observation that the differences between the two mark the beginnings of the later schism within social psychology between those who look towards the natural sciences for an understanding of human social behaviour and those who see the social sciences as their natural home. From within psychology it is only really the latter that fall within the bailiwick of my essay.

and social behaviour are our field of enquiry, and individuals are only of interest in so far as they are typical of groups' (quoted in Stanley 2001: 92). Nor does social science claim, even worse, that there is a 'group mind'.⁵ People always retain some novel and unique features compared to their fellow group members in terms of social and demographic characteristics or particular beliefs and practices, so social science studies *people in groups*, but it is the case that the groups' shared beliefs and practices shape what individual members believe, say and do, so social science focuses as well on *groups in people*. It is like the difference between an individual tree and the forest of which the tree is a small part. Extending this analogy, social science is constantly in the fruitful tension of exploring the individual tree, the wood which it comprises and the relationship between the two. That is to say, society is composed of individuals who live and work in groups, having relationships with other people and other groups to which everyone attaches meaning. There would be no culture, commerce or communication without groups. Individuals are made for group living; human nature *is* social.

It is worth quoting another Aberdonian on this. Robert MacIver joined the University of Aberdeen in 1907 as lecturer in politics, but in 1911 taught courses in sociology before moving to the University of Toronto as associate professor in political economy in 1915, and thence to Columbia University in New York where he held a combined chair in economics and sociology. He ended his days as Chancellor of the New School of Social Research in the city (for further details of MacIver's career, see Brewer 2007a). He was, thus, accomplished enough to write a short text in 1921 entitled *The Elements of Social Science* (MacIver 1921), which was the first academic textbook to recognize this field of enquiry under that name in Britain (readers who wish to pursue the history of the term 'social science' in Britain should see **Vignette 1**), going through at least seven editions (my copy is dated 1944). It was published a whole generation before the volumes of the *Encyclopaedia of Social Science* first appeared between 1930 and 1935. He begins his opening paragraph as follows (1921: 1). 'Wherever there is life there is society. For life can arise and

⁵ It was popular once to claim there was such a thing when, in early sociology and psychology, group behaviour was explained in terms of features of individuals (James Mickel Williams, an early social psychologist, referred to this as the 'social mind', 1920: 442). But the expansion in our idea of the social allows us to see such arguments as pre-social science. Today, with recognition of such phenomena as crowd behaviour and collective behaviour, we are more alert to the impact of the group on individual participants' minds.

Vignette 1 The origins of the term social science in Britain

By 1887, Beatrice Webb was deploying the term commonly and it was sufficiently established for her to write about its methodology (see 1926: 356–7), but its origins go much further back. I would like to emphasize three related but distinct precursors: Victorian social ameliorism; Christian social ethics; and the emergence of professional sociology. Victorian Britain was replete with references to ‘social science’ and it had a strong institutional presence. The British Association, later to become the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), had a Statistics section from 1833, only 2 years after formation of the Association itself, which became the Economic Science and Statistics section in 1856. The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (NAPSS), sometimes shortened to the Association of Social Science, was created in 1857 and held annual conferences, published a regular series of its transactions and the *Journal of Social Science* until 1884 (see Abrams 1968; Goldman 2002; Huch 1985). The NAPSS was an amalgam of several local statistical societies and reform groups concerned to understand and ameliorate social problems. Under the sway of Victorian altruism and religious social activism, the NAPSS appealed to the British Establishment – its Council included 31 Peers, 48 MPs, 19 Doctors of Law and QCs, 14 Fellows of the Royal Society, as well as numerous Baronets, Knights, medical professionals and churchmen (Abrams 1968: 45) – as well as the growing middle classes in the cities worried at the effects of urbanization and industrialization. It had sections dealing with law, education, crime, public health and ‘social economy’. It linked with the British Medical Association, the Law Amendment Society and the BAAS, drawing on faith in religion, science and social progress in an exercise of remarkable disciplinary openness. The *Journal of Social Science* reflected, among other things, concerns over sanitation, air pollution (‘noxious vapour’) and acid rain (‘coal acidity’ in rain), nursing care and hospital design; and, unusually for a time when women had to have their papers read by men, the NAPSS encouraged the participation of women and the working class. The Association’s demise in the mid-1880s is explained by the failure of ameliorism in the face of a more aggressive working class and trades union movement (Huch 1985: 281 n 13). Its notion of social science was very much restricted to problem-oriented, technical knowledge to assist improvement, and was atheoretical. There was no sense in which these social ills were connected to the kind of social structure generated by nineteenth-century industrialization; or at least, the NAPSS became redundant when this sort of analysis was pursued by social reformers more closely interested in the

condition of the working class, like Booth, Rowntree and the Webbs (Abrams 1968: 52). Christian ethics was also social ameliorist but had a much more elaborate sense of society as an interlocking set of institutions, primarily as a result of the application of the organic analogy to society. Elsewhere, I have addressed the influence of Christian groups on British sociology (see Brewer 2007b) and the same impulses to Christian sociology gave direction to social science. On the one hand, there was an essentially conservative view of society that was ambivalent towards modernism, in which religion, scientifically understood, could supply its moral canopy, and, conversely, a Christian socialist ethos concerned to make sense of social progress. Most of Catholic and 'high' Anglican sociology was shaped by the former, the latter by the sociology of Maurice Reckitt and his journal of Christian sociology *Christendom*. The Catholic Social Guild, involved in seminary training and work with the laity, produced *A Primer of Social Science* in 1913. Written by the Right Rev Monsignor Henry Parkinson, it went through several editions. Parkinson was a Jesuit, Rector of Oscott College in Birmingham, and the book was designed for members of the Guild who wished 'for a simple yet comprehensive manual of social science . . . under the light of Catholic principle' (1920[1913]: v). Despite his Catholic ethos, social science was defined reasonably well, as 'the systematic study of the social organism. By the social organism is understood the structure of Society (comprising individuals, families, groups, the Church and State) together with the mutual action of its various elements' (1920[1913]: 9). The book – my 1920 edition runs to 285 pages – has chapters on all the above but was primarily concerned with economic relations and 'social failures' (seen as personal and social; among the latter were included poverty and unemployment). The book was heavily focused on the conditions of the working class, taking up encyclicals by Pope Leo XIII, and featured a great deal of Catholic social teaching. Parkinson made the point, however, that social science is more than social ameliorism: 'it has for its special object the existing inequalities of the different classes, the deficiencies of society and their removal' (1920[1913]: 11). No single subject could give adequate expression to 'these myriad relations and forces [so] social science must presuppose the sciences of religion and morals but also that of politics, jurisprudence and economics' (1920[1913]: 11). Sociology was oddly missing from this list. That discipline's contribution to the etymology of social science, however, starts with MacIver in 1921. MacIver's *The Elements of Social Science* is more secular and modern than Parkinson's. It was designed partly for a readership in the Workers Educational Association in Britain, showing both continuity with the ameliorist tradition and the emerging interest in class, but also for MacIver's university students in Toronto as a textbook.

continue only in the society of like beings. Life is always obviously social. It is born and nurtured in society, it finds its degree of fulfilment, its character, its limitation, in society. Society is more than our environment: it is our nature. It is within us as well as around us.

That we now take this for granted as our original state of nature, when it was once thought not to be the case, is the result of the expansion of social science knowledge about ourselves. We might say that social science has become part of common sense knowledge and has become routinized – that is, social science is now a routine part of our taken-for-granted knowledge. The way we understand ourselves as human beings living in society is the product of what social science has enabled us to see about ourselves and the way we live in groups. As Giddens puts it (1996: 76), the major achievement of social science, which the natural sciences cannot emulate, is the realization that social science constitutes the very social world it studies by the absorption of social science into the sense people make of society. That is to say, social science has enabled us to see ourselves in a new light. We will return to this point, but in passing we can note as evidence of routinization the enculturation of social science terms into popular and media discourse, notably concepts like ‘moral panic’, inflation, social capital, McDonaldization,⁶ social class, infant nurturing, the division of labour, the law of diminishing returns, risk, socialization, introversion-extroversion, globalization and role, among many others.

The groups to which people belong can be large and amorphous collectivities with blurred boundaries, like social classes, genders, neighbourhoods, ethnic groups and nationalities, and more clearly marked and identifiable collections, like churches, factories, business organizations, political parties, families, schools and the like. The term ‘institution’ covers all these groupings and is, thus, open to confusion, in a way that the term ‘individual’ is not, because the nature of the loyalties represented by these various groups and their boundaries differs. Some institutions are very prescriptive in what they lay down for people to follow, such as legal rituals in courts of law, others permit choice, such as the institution of marriage. People also have different sorts of closeness to these institutions and relate to them in different ways,

⁶ George Ritzer, the inventor of the term, reflects on its wider use in the United Kingdom compared with the United States, which he takes as evidence of the greater capacity for social scientists to be public intellectuals in Britain (2006: 212).

and the groups change over time and with it our relationship to them. People change churches, vote for different parties and move in and out of different employment, so institutions reflect patterns of continuity and change. These patterns reflect the behaviours of many individuals, so while single individuals may change their behaviour little in the course of their lifetime, or a lot, patterns of continuity and change within institutions reflect those of the many more people who constitute the whole group. In this way, institutions take on behaviours and structures separate from the individuals who comprise them.

These institutional structures can in turn affect people. These effects vary with the nature of the institution. Some institutions have very direct effects that are immediately apparent. The decisions business firms make about production affect people who work there. Changes in party manifesto can influence people's decision about the casting of their vote. The more opaque and amorphous the boundaries that mark the institution, however, the more indirect these impacts seem, especially where they occur only slowly over time. These impacts on individual behaviour can be so indirect that attributing their cause to broader institutional change can be contested. For example, the extent to which changes in family structure (such as the rise of single-parent and multiple step-family structures) have impacted on children's educational performance, or their participation in crime, is not clear and is a matter of debate between social scientists. Other forms of institutional change are clearer in their effect on individual behaviour as a result of long-established social science analysis, such as the growth of consumer culture on young people's behaviour, the effects of long-term unemployment on the individual's health and well-being or the consequences of social class for children's language skills and verbal repertoire.

In saying that social science studies institutions and individuals, we are therefore also saying that it studies *social relationships*. To quote again MacIver's programmatic outline of social science at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'Society in the very widest sense include[s] every kind and degree of relationship entered into by social creatures. Society means the whole system of social relationships' (1921: 8). These social relations can be those between people themselves (such as the way family members relate to one another across the generations, or do members of a trade union with managers or businesses with workers) and the relations the groups to which they belong

have as groups (such as the behaviour of trade unions, businesses, political parties, social classes and the like), as well as the relations these groups and institutions have to one another (such as the link between female gender and church attendance or the links between business firms and political parties).

These relations are two-way. Social science studies people's behaviour in groups, the way in which institutions are in part constituted by people acting together within them, as well as studying the impact institutional structures have on people's behaviour, the way in which institutions constrain and shape people's behaviour. In this way, social science studies the relationships both people and institutions have to the collectivity called 'society' and the way in which society is simultaneously both the outcome of people's relationships and the context within which they relate. Society is seen as a myriad of complex interrelations, going off in all directions, at the same time both cause and effect of ordinary people's behaviour. Society, thus, has a dual character. It is both external and internal to people, something that exists beyond people to shape what they do, while being the creation of people who act in socially acceptable and agreed ways. It is the framework for human behaviour, the apparatus of rules, regulations, norms and values that shape people's interrelationships, but constructed by humans themselves. Peter Berger (1963) once put this aptly: people exist in society and society in people. For simplicity's sake, we might call the one societal reproduction, the other societal production: society is reproduced (replicated over time and space) by what people produce (behaviour, social relationships), which then shape people's future production and, by further regression, society's continued reproduction, and so on.

Some broad characterizations of social science might be suggested by this working definition thus far. Particular social sciences have placed emphasis on the question of how it is that society exists in people (societal reproduction). Cultural studies, social psychology, education, language and communication studies and social anthropology have in their different ways all contributed significantly to our understanding of the process of child socialization, language acquisition and the multiple ways culture is learnt. This left the other social sciences to primarily focus on the question of people's behaviour in society (societal production). And the professionalization of the social sciences into disciplinary blocks resulted in attention to political, economic, sociological and legal behaviour, by individuals and institutions, among many other things.

However, the whole point about the dual character of society is that the two sides are intertwined to the point that it is too crude to demarcate the particular social sciences by separating them according to one or other side of a Janus face. All social sciences concern themselves with both societal reproduction and production. Economics is as much interested in how people internalize economic norms and behave in markets as sociology is in the process of cultural learning and change. Economics does not only deal mathematically with quantity but also with subjective perceptions of quality of life and value, with the impact of external factors *on* markets as well as traders' emotional states *in* markets. Economic markets could not operate unless people make sense of the meaning of key economic processes like investment and risk, and make evaluations of them. Social psychology addresses childhood socialization (society in people) but also issues around identity and how identity formation shapes people's behaviour in settings of inter-group interaction (people in society). This is to say, in studying the social relationships individuals and institutions have in society, social science necessarily studies the social relationships individuals and institutions have with each other *and* towards society itself.

Putting this in a slightly more complicated way, the subject matter of social science is the *social* nature of society, its continual reproduction through people's production. This is not to claim, of course, that social science necessarily has to focus on societal production and reproduction at the same time. By this I mean that social science is demarcated by its interest in addressing the ways in which individuals and institutions internalize society and behave within it, but the two sides of the Janus face can be studied together or separately.

Three features of society need to be stressed at this point. First, social science is not restricted just to what people in society say about themselves in the process of societal production and reproduction. This enables us to demarcate professional social science from common sense. Secondly, society is spatial and temporal but knows no spatial or temporal bounds, and thus neither should social science. This requires us to take account of the globalization of society. Thirdly, our notion of society has to be broad and inclusive in order to avoid privileging any particular social science take on it. This means that we have to rescue the idea of society from sociology. Let me deal with each briefly in turn.

The subject matter of social science is defined by its *own* criteria of significance not common sense. Sociologists in particular have struggled to comprehend this, even fearing that sociology might be replaced in the media and popular culture by the common sense routinization of sociological knowledge (for example, Savage and Burrows 2007: 894). Social science would be mere reportage if members' own accounts settled the task of understanding social life. Social science puts these accounts to test; they are our starting point but they are rarely our end. There are several reasons why people's accounts should be treated as problematic. They may not be aware of the reasons why they hold these beliefs or behave in the way they do, or their reasons may be partisan and partial or too deeply emotional to be articulated readily. These beliefs are often embedded in common sense (and the common sense translation of social science knowledge back into common sense) and common sense needs to be assessed for its correspondence to the evidence. People's accounts also vary (both between people and perhaps in the same person over space and time) and the variations need to be placed in the context that explains them. Furthermore, people are often unaware of both the implicit biological and emotional knowledge and the broad social structural forces impinging on their lives, and people's narratives, thus, underplay the structural factors in culture, the market and the state, locally, nationally and globally, that fully explain their views, behaviours and beliefs. People are deeply affected by global economic markets, for example, of which they have no clear knowledge, nor any understanding of the causes of their plight, which can only be brought to light by highly technical social science knowledge. They are also often oblivious to the unintended consequences of their actions and those of others (which makes the unforeseen and unanticipated nature of social, political and economic action a central interest of social science).

People's accounts are also affected by the operation of power, inequality and prestige; it may well be that people's definition of their situation becomes real in its consequences, as the sociologist W. I. Thomas argued in 1929, but some have the power to impose their definition on others, and understanding whose views count the most and why is a key task of social science. People are also unaware of regularities, patterns and standardized practices across time and space, which the social scientist is able to observe. Conceptual advances in understanding made by social science on the basis of observed

regularities – the law of diminishing returns in economics, the impact of anomie on suicide within sociology, the impact of embourgeoisement on working class voting patterns or the glass ceiling in women's empowerment in work – are only conscious to people as personal experiences, which underscores their wider effects in culture, the market and the state globally. For these reasons and more, social science does not stop at the understanding of society that members themselves have.

Secondly, it is one of the successes of social science knowledge and its routinization that we can confidently assert, and the lay person in the street fully appreciate, that society is spatial but not constrained by space, and is both in time and out of time. 'Society' always has some spatial and temporal referent, some physical location in time; this is inevitably so if it consists of people and institutions, since these naturally imply place and time. Even in its analytic sense of 'society' in the abstract, it is always evidence from some place or other at one time or another that goes into our understanding of what society means, whether or not the analysis makes this clear. And the lay person's appropriation of social science knowledge about society tends to place it – locate it – in time and physical space somewhere. We know, however, that the globalization of society has proceeded apace so that our idea of society needs to go beyond our immediate experience of society in our locality and neighbourhood, even our national society, to now incorporate global society over time. In this sense, society transcends space and time. The behaviour and social relationships of people and institutions that social science studies, therefore, need to be extended to include their local, national and global dimensions across time. Indeed, the social sciences have been very successful in charting the growth and expansion of global interconnections, whether in economic and financial links, political and geopolitical strategic relations, military connectedness, cultural and diasporic links, cultural homogenization, global civil society, the development of international humanitarian law to regulate the conduct of war and the like. There is no social science discipline that is unaffected by globalization and no aspect of society that is not in some way impacted by it.

This reinforces the public importance of social science. If we are to properly understand the contemporary world and the issues it presents us and future generations, whether we mean by this our local neighbourhood, nation or

global society, then social science is essential. Society needs social science to make sense of itself, to show how society works and how the complexity of the public issues society faces now and in the future are intertwined with globalization and operate in local, national and global spaces. This is more clearly understood for some public issues than others, such as the worldwide banking crisis or industrial restructuring, because global economic connectedness is an everyday experience for the worker whose job is under threat or the small business and ordinary family suffering under the credit crunch. But it applies generally. The army of helpers on wet Saturday mornings standing on the high street distributing leaflets for some charity or other, or the small band of dedicated Christian or Islamic extremists bellowing hellfire or martyrdom down loudspeakers as shoppers pass by, are all members of civil society groups in a neighbourhood who, while thinking globally, act locally on humanitarian, civil and human rights issues, motivated in their philanthropy by evidence of global suffering, or in their fundamentalism by reaction to international geopolitical strategy or to cultural homogenization that has provoked fierce religious reaction. It is social science analysis that helps us understand the plight of the starving child in Africa and the problem of AIDS in Rwanda, or the outbreak of the Arab Spring or the summer riots in England in 2011 (on the latter, for example, see Morrell et al. 2011).

Social science provides a double insight, however. Social science helps us understand both the global, national and local nature of these issues *and* why people react to them in the way they do in whatever spaces they find themselves. That is to say, we owe to social science both the awareness we have of the complex nature of public issues in the contemporary world and the way in which the rhetoric of globalization is mobilized by politicians and the public alike to make sense of them.

Thirdly, it matters greatly for the insightfulness of social science that society is understood broadly to empower *all* social sciences. Philippe Fontaine (2006: 193) made the telling observation that all social science disciplines have a tendency, arising from disciplinary specialization, to see the working of the whole society through one of its segments – economists the economy, political scientists the polity, anthropology culture and so on. But sociologists are especially vulnerable to this temptation because sociology is supposedly the most general or synthesizing of the social sciences. Disciplinary closure

has seen 'society' become narrowly claimed by sociology as its domain, when what we need is an overarching conception of society which holds the social sciences together.

For all my eulogizing of Robert MacIver's pioneering introduction to social science in 1921 that made it the study of society in its broadest sense, he thought sociology proffered a privileged perspective on society. 'There is a group of sciences which study particular aspects of social life,' he wrote, but 'none of these studies society as a whole. They thus leave room for, in fact they invite, a more comprehensive science. This is the science now named sociology' (1921: 12).⁷

Sociology is not unique in aggrandizing itself. Geography and anthropology see themselves as synthesizing social sciences based around the centrality, respectively, of space and culture. The comparative study of social institutions within anthropology, for example, furnishes economic anthropology, political anthropology, religion and social relations (of kin, family and neighbour), among others, which are connected by its emphasis on culture. James Mickel Williams's textbook on social psychology, written in 1917 but published after World War I, saw 'human motives' as the base to all phenomena in social science and it was, thus, he wrote, the task of social psychology to co-ordinate the work of all social scientists (1920: vii). He proceeded to illustrate this point with reference to political science, jurisprudence, economics, history and sociology. All social science, he wrote, is premised on 'fundamental psychological assumptions' (1920: xiii) and every discipline in this field needed the aid of social psychologists for interpretation (1920: xiv). This is a truism but it impacts on sociology above other social sciences. It is for this reason that most of the early professional sociologists – people like Durkheim in France and MacIver in Britain – singled out psychology and eagerly wrote programmatic statements on the boundaries between them, in which psychology was the secondary discipline.

⁷ It is for this reason that MacIver's introductory text in sociology was entitled *Society*. First published in 1937 (1950 in the United Kingdom), it went through 11 reprints, the last in 1967, when it was co-written with Charles Page (see MacIver and Page 1967). In another of the early sociology textbooks in Britain, Morris Ginsberg's *Sociology* (Ginsberg 1934), sociology was again seen as the most general and synthesizing of the social sciences. I owe to John Scott the observation that this was a trait of early British sociology generally, in people like Branford, Geddes and Hobhouse, who saw in sociology a bridge between the ethical interests of social philosophy and empirical social science. This was not, however, MacIver's motivation. This may be linked to the fact that, by the time *The Elements of Social Science* was published, he had spent six years in Canada, where he was pioneering sociology in a different national context.

Sociology emerged as a word in the mid-nineteenth century to describe the scientific study of society but was only becoming currency when MacIver wrote his assessment decades later. While Auguste Comte, who gave us the term, saw the discipline as the Queen of the Sciences, with sociology universalized as the final stage of knowledge, most of the classical practitioners of sociology who are appropriated by the discipline for shaping sociology as the scientific study of society, such as Mark, Weber and Durkheim, were working across disciplines (the exception being psychology), and, as a result, have been taken as representatives in economics, education, politics, social anthropology, public law and history. This is perhaps epitomized by Weber's monumental contribution to social science going under the title *Economy and Society*. There is in the early discipline of sociology, therefore, an inherent interdisciplinarity – psychology excepted – that fits uneasily with its later practices of disciplinary closure.

Two books written by sociologists in the period when the discipline was just entering its moment of rapid expansion in Britain and which went under titles that invoked social science, Julius Gould's *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences* (Gould 1965) and W. G. Runciman's *Social Science and Political Theory* (Runciman 1965), not only considered sociology and social science as interchangeable terms, sociology's triumphalism shone through as the premier social science. 'We are all sociologists now', Gould declared in his opening paragraph (1965: 9), while Runciman commenced his first chapter by stating: 'If sociology is defined as the systematic study of collective human behavior, then such separate disciplines as economics, or demography, or criminology, or politics should be regarded as co-ordinate but distinctive branches of sociology (or social science)' (1965: 1). There is little diffidence about disciplinary closure here.

Whatever ambivalence there may be among some sociologists 50 years on about disciplinarity,⁸ which John Urry captures in his portrayal of sociology

⁸ For example, Holmwood (2010) refers to sociology as interdisciplinary but construes this as problematic, threatening its intellectual coherence and disciplinary core. His argument reflects my earlier point about the ambiguity in the relationship between sociology and other social sciences. Sociology (like anthropology and geography to some extent) makes claims to a synoptic view of 'society', while economics, criminology, politics and the rest make claims to specialized competence in relation to particular social phenomena. My argument is that this claim reflects sociology's practices of disciplinary closure and that this synoptic, synthesizing perspective can be found in the generic definition of social science proffered here, whose subject matter is the social nature of culture, the market and the state, locally, nationally and globally. Whether contemporary social science disciplines lay claim to it is another matter given their tendencies to disciplinary closure.

as parasitic on other disciplines (1981) and Liz Stanley in the notion that the discipline has always been hybridic (2005), it is necessary to avoid privileging sociology for its attention to society. A definition of social science that valorizes the notion of society, therefore, needs to make it absolutely clear that society is a multidisciplinary entity that contains within it intellectual arenas and institutional spaces that facilitate insight from the full range of social sciences. Society broadly conceived includes intellectual arenas like culture, civil society, economy and markets, government and the state, and law and legal governance, all of which can be further subdivided into smaller interconnected arenas; and all of these come within the broad rubric of 'society'. In this respect, one can agree with Runciman (1965: 176) that, for example, Bendix and Lipset's famous argument (1957) that political science studies the effects of the state on society and sociology the effect of society on the state, is a misconception for the state and society so closely involve each other. Society, in other words, is not reducible to culture, is much broader than markets and the state, being inclusive of them, as well as of law, civil society and the array of individual and institutional behaviours that occur within these spheres.

These intellectual arenas not only represent cognate fields of enquiry about society, they have embedded within them various sets of ideas, concepts and theories, as well as methods of research by which to pursue these ideas, which go towards constituting a vocabulary for talking about society, understanding it and representing it to people who wish to know how society works. These arenas furnish vocabularies and practices by which social scientists do their research, giving ways of talking about society which are mediated by the public in the sense they make of social science knowledge.

These arenas are further codified by the range of institutional spaces within which these vocabularies and practices operate. These institutional spaces include places where the sets of ideas are taught, like schools, colleges and universities, places where the ideas are developed, extended and progressed through research, like universities, institutes and research centres, and specialist institutions that promote and sponsor the insights garnered within these arenas, such as learned societies, professional associations, publishers, journals, editors and editorial boards and, in a few cases where professional accreditation is necessary, like psychology and law, professional bodies capable of determining rights to practise in the arena.

We might consider these intellectual arenas, vocabularies and institutional spaces as defining the separate social sciences. The separation of society into cognate arenas, which is reinforced by the intellectual practices and institutional spaces that mark the individual social sciences as discrete, should not disguise, however, that society is the unifying subject matter of them all. This is concealed when considering society the special domain of sociology. So ingrained is this disciplinary closure that it is difficult now to use the term 'society' in its inclusive sense (especially given that it is a sociologist using it here). To represent society in its inclusive sense, meaning culture, civil society, economy and the market, law, governance and the state, I will run together three terms that summarize the arenas that comprise it – 'culture, the market and the state' is my longhand for 'society'.⁹ This gives us, I think, the overarching conception of society that ties the social sciences together.

Culture, market and the state are discrete domains in society but they clearly penetrate each other to an extent that they act as a synonym for society. The 2011 Eurozone currency crisis illustrates how closely connected are markets and states, with Greek political interests skirmishing with global market considerations; and the suggestion from religious bodies in the *meleé* that bankers should be levied a 'Robin Hood tax' highlights the intrusion of cultural beliefs about fairness and moral obligations. While social scientists and philosophers have always noted the moral limits of markets, articulated most recently by Satz (2010) and Sandel (2012), some economists are themselves recognizing that governments can be against markets (for example, see Bayer and Drache 1996).¹⁰ The Euro crisis, for all its financial dimensions, is now

⁹ I am grateful to Hastings Donnan for the observation that anthropology utilizes 'culture' as its unifying theme and thus does not regard culture as an isolatable domain alongside the market and the state. For anthropologists it is not one of society's segments, a variable alongside others, but is the central factor through which all else is mediated and articulated. This view is not problematic to my argument. Social anthropologists use 'culture' in the way I do 'society' to signify the encompassing domain through which the study of social relations and social institutions is best approached. I prefer my terminology because the subject area I am discussing after all is called 'social science' not 'cultural science', which has an entirely different connotation. Hence, when I use the term 'culture' I am not referring to it as the central prism for understanding social institutions and social relations but in a more restrictive manner as thoughts, perceptions, values and symbols. That is to say, to learned behaviour and beliefs. This falls short of making culture the organizing principle for human society as a whole.

¹⁰ Ever since we recognized the 'two Adam Smiths' – the author of arguments about moral sentiments and the progenitor of the division of labour and the wealth of nations – debate has raged over whether markets are amoral or not. Free markets were once thought of as just that, devoid of agency. Yet moral neutrality is impossible in one sense because markets are composed of individuals and institutions with values. This is where we get ideas from about corporate social responsibility. The more important issue is whose values? But if in terms of motivations we can see markets as moral,

also about the clash between market principles and local cultural practices in Greece and Spain, and highlights the conflict between politics in the nation state and global economic markets.

If I can recap the argument so far, what is 'social' about social science, is that it studies how society in its inclusive sense works, reproduces itself and operates across time and space in local, national and global contexts. Putting this in a verbose way, social science studies individuals and institutions as they interrelate within culture, the market and the state, thereby making culture, the market and the state arenas that are reproduced by the behaviour, relations and interrelations of people and institutions but which simultaneously constrain and shape what they do. This process of societal reproduction, which creates culture, the market and the state as constraining frameworks, operates on three levels – local, national and global – ensuring that culture, the market and the state exist both in time and space and across time and space. The 'social' gives social science a very wide remit when understood in this way.

We can catch a glimpse of the scale and breadth of the 'social' by considering the phenomenon of farming, as one aspect of society, from a social science perspective. The topic implicates economics and business through the relevance of markets, production, supply and demand and the growth of agribusiness; it implicates human geography through land use and changing land use, or population relocations with the arrival of the ex-urban middle class as commuters and second-home owners; law through inheritance of land, as well as legal regulations of farming and animal welfare; cultural studies through the symbolic meaning of land and the countryside; sociology through notions of community and social and family relations in rural areas, or the gendered experiences of farming and rural isolation; environmental studies through land and wildlife protection, or the negative impact of agrichemicals;

it is less certain that in terms of their financial consequences markets act morally. Markets have always been subject to legal regulation and constrained by politics and government; this was what gave meaning to Keynesian economics as a response to the Great Depression in the 1930s. The current debate about a Robin Hood tax, a term ironically first used by an Italian Treasury minister in 2008 but now taken up by many charities and civil society groups, including the Church, is about the moral responsibilities of markets for some of the financial consequences of aggregate market outcomes. The intrusion of culture, as distinct from politics, into the operation of markets will be fascinating to see unfold. The Anglican and Catholic churches support the idea of a Robin Hood tax, which suggests that the culture war between science and religion will take on another dimension in the confrontation between religion and economics, itself an ancient battle over such things as usury, but now given a modern twist. When crossing the Atlantic to Britain, the 'occupy Wall Street' movement occupied cathedral grounds – St Paul's, Sheffield, Exeter, Glasgow – throwing up as much a challenge to the Anglican Church as to bankers.

psychology through such issues as rural isolation, well-being and loneliness, or the high incidence of farming-related suicides; criminology through rural crime, or the problem of the rural underclass, out-bought for houses and jobs by the ex-urban incomers; politics would address the rural vote, the politics of class relations in the countryside or the politicization of the so-called 'country way of life' through such things as the foxhunting ban; social policy would consider transport policy or policies of elder care in rural areas. And social anthropology's significant contribution is to remind us that farming practices are encultured, taking different forms in various cultural spaces, and that classification systems that are self-evident in the West – wild/domestic, cultivated/uncultivated, nature/culture – are not always understood in the same way in other agricultural modes of production; and so on.

These examples do not come even close to exhausting the sorts of issues an interdisciplinary social science addresses about farming. The fact that readers may object to my construal of them in disciplinary terms, since population change in rural areas, for example, is not the sole preserve of human geography, nor rural loneliness and suicides of psychology, only proves my argument about the essential unity between the social sciences deriving from an inclusive notion of society. And these issues have local, national and global dimensions, since concern over the 'food miles' farm produce travels or animal welfare concerns for exported beasts, for example, shows farming to be global, national and local all at once, existing across space and time. Agribusiness, international food markets, futures trading in world markets on cereals, for example, reflect locally on decisions an individual farmer makes about what crops to grow or beasts to keep on a single farm, but this global-local nexus, which Roland Robertson captures wonderfully with his term 'glocalization' (1995),¹¹ radiates out from the domain of economics when it has consequences for land use or ownership in the area, or environmental protection, rural unemployment or housing, rural crime, farm suicides or whatever, drawing in other social sciences.

It is a truism accepted I think by practitioners and the public alike now that society in this inclusive sense is a myriad of complex interrelations mediating culture, markets and the state, spreading across time and space. What needs

¹¹ This term began in the discipline of economics in Japan but was popularized in Western social science by Roland Robertson to mean a combination of globalization and localization.

to catch up with this commonplace is the realization that social science also has to be decompartmentalized.¹² Social life knows no hermetic separation, neither should social science, for the 'social' is a thread that unites the infinite variety of processes, activities and relationships studied by them.

What is 'science' about social science?

There are some disciplines that transcend the natural and social science divide and have elements of both – physical and social/cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology and social psychology, or physical geography and human/cultural geography – and while the 'social science' end is mostly marked by a qualifier, occasionally it is not and cultural and physical anthropologists, for example, exist side by side under the one label.¹³ The exchanges between them can be acrimonious, and sometimes they exist almost as separate intellectual arenas, as they do notably in anthropology and psychology, but there is at least in principle the possibility of the social science component building on the natural science one. In much the same way, in sexuality studies, social science interest in transgender has drawn on developments in biological science (see Hird 2004), the sociology of climate change on environmental science (see Urry 2011), and the human brain has become an object of sociological interest (Bone 2010). I will be dealing here with the social sciences and, where there is an internal divide, with the 'cultural', 'human' and 'social' end of those disciplines. I want to address the kind of science it is they do, for if 'society' is a contested notion within social science, the idea of 'science' is even more so.

We can dismiss outright those critics of social science who deny the appellation science on grounds there is no such thing as society to have a scientific study of, for reasons established in the previous section. A much more serious criticism is that the very nature of society precludes science. It

¹² C. Wright Mills (1959) also railed against the compartmentalization of the social sciences and his book on the sociological imagination was, despite its title, a platform for their unification. Ironically, disciplinary closure proceeded apace in the 1960s, when professionalization accompanied the expansion of the social sciences.

¹³ A similar disjuncture exists, of course, in law between private and public law, only the latter of which can be seriously considered a social science, although this is more a division between the orientation towards either humanities (private law) or social science (public law). I owe to Norma Dawson the observation that some private lawyers strictly speaking consider law *sui generis*, a subject area unto itself.

has long been wondered how a science of society is possible when social life is not subject to the same predictable, universal laws as the natural world, making replication of findings almost impossible, when causal variables are hard to isolate in experimental settings, or causality is rendered pointless with the uniqueness of particular historical sequences of behaviour and contexts, when researchers are themselves part of the social world they are studying and their presence a variable in it, and when our subject matter is people who have their own interpretations and senses of how the social world works (and of social science itself). Social scientists make claims that are capable of being interpreted by the subject matter they purport to explain.

Paradoxically, the very success of social science in routinizing its knowledge within common sense adds to its difficulties in claiming status as a science, for not only are 'social meanings', what Max Weber called 'understandings' or *Verstehen*, part of our subject matter, people's common sense rendering of professional social science knowledge gets incorporated into our subject matter as an infinite regression. What I have in mind here, for example, is the way in which taxi drivers, hair stylists and neighbours in shopping queues or over garden fences talk about the topics that interest social scientists and develop their own answers to the questions we ask about economic risk and markets, or why crime is rising (or not), schools are failing (or not) or unemployment increasing (or not), which are in part based on their own common sense knowledge but also the popularization of social science knowledge into common sense by the way in which the media, politicians, journalists and other mediators of social science in popular culture interpret and make sense of social science knowledge.¹⁴ In my discipline, this is called 'lay sociology' and lay sociological thinking is practised fulsomely by ordinary people as part of their everyday life and work. This lay sociology then gets studied by sociologists and incorporated into further social science knowledge (such as decision-making by police officers based on their lay sociology about crime; see Bennett 1979). This makes our subject matter appear slippery with few of the 'objective' qualities of the natural world.

It was, thus, boldly asserted in 1970 by a practising social scientist that the social sciences 'are not, and cannot hope to become, sciences at all'

¹⁴ It is worth recalling that some sociologists see this as a source of anxiety (for example, Savage and Burrows 2007: 894), others as the discipline's major achievement (for example, Giddens 1996: 76).

(Ryan 1970: 125), a view Ryan has held to since (see Ryan 1981). The date is deeply significant. This was the heyday of scientific social science, almost 20 years on from when Madge (1953), in explaining the 'tools of social science' in a book of the same title, had self-assuredly exclaimed the possibility of experimentation in social science and use of the hypothetico-deductive method.¹⁵ However, Ryan's judgement was not iconoclastic, for it was made precisely at the time when attacks on positivist notions of science were gaining sufficient ground for many in the social sciences not to care, let alone aspire, to be scientific.¹⁶ Derek Phillips (1973) judged his book title at this time very well, *Abandoning Method*. The near half-century since then has seen the 'science war' unabated, refreshed even, with ever more troops.¹⁷

Responses to the conflict have been several. I identify three ideal types, all of which undertake worthwhile studies of culture, the market and the state and make significant contributions to social science, but which put down different claims to scientific status. I call these *science-loyalism*, *science-rejectionism* and *science-affirmation*. Science-loyalists unashamedly see themselves as scientists (sometimes deleting 'social' from the couplet) and address those areas of culture, market and the state which do more readily lend themselves to scientific methods. In Steuer's otherwise highly critical depiction of the scientific claims of the social sciences (2002), he still recognized that some social science research differed from natural science only by degree: there was just not very much of it outside economics. Science loyalists look for evidence that can be quantified and replicated. For example, Skinner's behaviourist approach in psychology, psephology (voting and election studies) in political science, econometrics in economics, population statistics and trends in demography, the 'political arithmetic' tradition in social policy or 'analytical sociology', as the Nuffield College Oxford sociologists like to characterize their quantitative approach, remain experimental, mathematical, statistical and deductive, and often involve theoretically led computer modelling.

¹⁵ This is a theory of explanation that requires the development of general laws, from which various empirical statements are deductively drawn, which are then tested through research, leading to further refinement of the general statements and further testing.

¹⁶ Positivism is a methodological tradition that seeks to emulate the practices and approach of the natural sciences. On positivism and its critics in social science see Giddens (1974, 1996: 65–77).

¹⁷ Livingstone (2012) has shown how the science wars in human and cultural geography are enlivened by interpenetration from the culture wars, including such notions as the cultural meaning of science, which often has geographic and place variations, and the aged battle lines between science and religion.

Science-loyalists do not dominate a whole social science discipline, perhaps with the exception of demography and social statistics (omitted from Steuer's critical analysis), although they would like to and urge on their uncommitted peers the virtue of their theoretical ideas and quantitative research methods. But some were very popular for a long while – notably behaviourism in psychology (which has now also expanded into behaviourist economics) – and significant sub-areas of social science disciplines are commanded by them. Econometrics and quantitative sociology, for example, receive preferential allocation of research resources and postgraduate studentships from the ESRC in order to boost their skills base, and concern over undergraduate and postgraduate teaching of statistics and quantitative methods is voiced by science-loyalists in most social science disciplines.

Science-rejectionism comes in at least two sub-types. First are those science-rejectionists who deconstruct the scientific method to render it merely a series of social practices and thus without honour. This itself comes in two colours. The 1960s'–70s' hue was persuaded by Thomas Kuhn (1962) that 'normal' science was an ideological practice and thus should not be held up as a role model for the social sciences. The 1980s'–90s' version was shaped by European postmodernism and alleged that all research practices are social constructs, social as well as natural sciences, thereby removing any distinction between professional and lay knowledge. If in 1965 we were all sociologists then, by 1985 we were all mythmakers, just like the Azande in our witchcraft. Science-rejectionists of this first type remain committed to the study of culture, the market and the state but rarely self-identify as social *scientists*, preferring other identifiers. If not a disciplinary term, the prefix 'social' can be put before a whole number of options – philosopher, theorist, historian – but 'social' is always there as an important identity marker.

The second type of science-rejectionist does not wish to impugn the scientific method, much less the practices of social science. They look to the humanistic and literary traditions within social science, accepting – celebrating – that their subject matter and approach is different in kind not just complexity from natural science. The role models here are the humanities, with their literary, cultural and philosophical emphases (hence, for example, Robert Nisbet's 1976 book *Sociology as an Art Form*), or the *Verstehende* tradition, with the search for meaning, understanding and empathy replacing cause and effect

relationships. The emergence of social constructionism in psychology in the 1990s (on which see Burr 1995), has proved seismic in a discipline that is noted for its commitment to rigorous scientific method,¹⁸ as earlier did the linguistic and conversation analysis-turn in social science, which Gellner famously dismissed as 'the Californian way to subjectivity' (1975), although he was no practitioner of empirical research himself. The 'cultural turn' in sociology from the 1990s caused some sociologists to express anxiety for the future of sociological methods (see Rojek and Turner 2000), as did British sociology's expertise in qualitative and ethnographic methods among at least two well-known analytical quantitative sociologists (Goldthorpe 2000; Erikson 2005). The London School of Economics (LSE) economist Max Steuer (2002) only partly facetiously suggested all social scientists be trained as economists because everything else was 'pretend social science', bearing no resemblance to science in any form (2002: 55).¹⁹ And who can forget the demographer, David Glass, famous for being the only sociologist in modern times elected to the Royal Society, for his put-down of the community studies tradition as 'the poor sociologist's substitute for the novel' (quoted in Bell and Newby 1971: 13)?

However, new literary and culture-oriented subject areas like cultural studies, postmodern studies, celebrity studies and media studies have replaced sociology as the butt of the science-loyalists' rebuke against pretend

¹⁸ Social psychology, along with political psychology, has long wrestled with what type of science it aspires to be and many would agree with Brinkmann (2011) that it is a moral science. I owe to John Kremer the observation that it was in the 1970s that a very healthy and vibrant critical version of social psychology emerged in European social psychology, with the likes of Henri Tajfel, Michael Billig and Serge Moscovici. Social psychology positioned itself perilously between psychology and the social sciences, recognizing the contribution of many different approaches, operating at different levels of analysis, from the micro to the macro. The hard science end of psychology, though, adheres to the natural sciences. Social psychology was rocked as a discipline in 2010–11 by discovery that one of its leading practitioners, Diederick Stapel, from Tilburg University, fabricated some of his data. Many of his publications have been withdrawn. In 2011, he voluntarily returned his 1997 PhD to the University of Amsterdam. Stapel was considered one of Europe's leading cognitive social psychologists and in response to this fraud the discipline has sought to restore replication and falsification as the cornerstone of its commitment to the scientific method. Sir Cyril Burt's fraudulence in his quantitative psychological research on IQ in twins illustrates, of course, that fabrication is not restricted to social psychology or non-numerate disciplines. There is an impression that fabrication of data is becoming more common and is linked to the marketization of higher education and the concomitant stress on performance indicators, although it remains to be proved whether the publish-or-perish ethos of marketized higher education has led to more fraud or better ways of detecting it.

¹⁹ We should be reminded, I think, that economics is not everywhere held as the model for scientific practice. Ormerod (1994: 67) in particular considers it 'virulently esoteric chat' and its 'bad science', in the form of macroeconomics, responsible for bringing capitalism to the brink of global depression (Ormerod 2010).

or non-science (and ridicule in sections of popular culture), although, with the exception of postmodernism, there is nothing in principle that prevents a quantitative approach being applied in these fields or the collection of numerical data rather than extracts of natural language, as content analysis in media studies illustrates. Science-rejectionists of this second type are comfortable about the appellation 'social scientist' but look on the second part of the couplet as a convenience, devoid of meaning to them, or put the term 'science' in quotation marks. Where it matters to them the word social is used again as a prefix to a number of more preferable options; their commitment to the label social, however, remains keen.

The third response I call science-affirming. It upholds the *idea of science* (a phrase I will define shortly), believes in the possibility of a scientific study of culture, the market and the state, and adopts an attitude towards research practice and data that is thought of as scientific, but science means something different than in the natural sciences. While natural science models of social science research are rejected, scientific practice is still valued. This affirming view was the one adopted by the 1996 Gulbenkian Commission on the future of the social sciences (Gulbenkian Commission 1996). It was this affirmation, after all, that permitted Malinowski, the founder of modern social anthropology, to describe it in 1922 as a discipline based on 'scientific ethnography' (a view that came under attack as part of the science wars inside social anthropology in the 1980s). The science-affirmers, however, can be found working in all the social sciences, even in the same areas and, where this is feasible, on the same topics as those who are science-loyalists or advocates of the literary, humanistic and *Verstehende* traditions, but are distinguished from the former by their honest realization that they are science-like in their practice, and from the latter by their affirmation of science as an aspiration and intent. Both terms in the couplet 'social scientist' have meaning here and are equally important.²⁰

It is worth elaborating on the meaning of science to the science-affirmers and how they can sustain their avowal in the light of the objections raised against 'the idea of a social science' – a phrase that gave the title to Peter

²⁰ One of the strong advocates of the Gulbenkian Commission's approach to science is Byrne (2011), who appropriated the Commission's definition of science, which portrays it as any systematic secular knowledge that is empirically grounded (Byrne 2011: 2). This idea of science is quite loose and inclusive and contrasts only slightly with my own definition below.

Winch's defence more than 50 years ago (Winch 1958) – since this, I proffer, is the ideal type that corresponds closest to most people's practice. To suggest that social science is a kind of social physics, as Comte claimed of sociology in the nineteenth century, or that we adopt more of the scientific practices of physics, as Taagepera (2008) argues, requires that our subject matter be treated as if it was inanimate matter in motion affected only by external stimuli. This would deny social science the perspicacity of understanding what is distinctive about its subject matter.

To appreciate the force of this point, it is necessary to be reminded of our earlier discussion that the subject matter of social science is the *social* nature of society. Society has a dual character: people are in society and society in people. People, groups and institutions act within culture, the market and the state across time and space, in part producing them and produced by them, so that local, national and global society is both the outcome of individual, group and institutional behaviour and the framework that shapes this behaviour. Thus, some social science investigation addresses what culture, the market and the state mean to people, groups and institutions, how they understand, make sense of and reproduce culture, markets and the state across time and space (societal reproduction), while others investigate what people, groups and institutions believe, how they act and interrelate in culture, the market and the state (societal production). A social physics would be incapable of capturing what marks the social sciences as special in their insightfulness because it is blind to the reproduction side of society's Janus face.

If not social physics though, there are characteristic traits of investigation and practice that define the aspiration to be scientific among the science-affirmers. These can be listed as follows:

- the commitment to developing evidence-based observations, descriptions and explanations (where 'evidence' is understood to include empirical data as well as theoretical ideas and models);
- the commitment to professional and ethical practice, including accuracy, honesty and integrity, in all stages of the investigation;
- the commitment to objectivity (since even subjectivity can be studied objectively); and
- the separation of value and evidence.

These are self-explanatory and need no special justification. They are worded carefully to avoid any suggestion of privileging empiricism or ‘practical knowledge’, since I wish to make clear that major theoretical contributions are part of social science (and it is worth remembering, for example, the profound theoretical ideas about culture established through ethnographies in early British social anthropology).

However, a brief comment is necessary on the latter because of the hoary old debates about value, ideology and the ‘open society’ that have characterized much of the philosophy of the social sciences over the last century. I will be dealing with moral values and the idea of value neutrality in the last chapter, but it is important here to explain that what I mean by this is not that social scientists be value free in the sense of having no values – which would be absurd – but that their values are separated from the evidence they collect, so that evidence is not distorted for the sake of the values they hold. I believe this interpretation is entirely consistent with Weber’s meaning of value neutrality, as I will argue later. Note, I am not saying that values should be separated from the investigation completely, since it is widely accepted, in the natural and social sciences, that researchers are often drawn to their topics precisely for value reasons. It is the separation of values from evidence that is the key to scientific practice and objectivity.

In its generic sense, science involves the observation, description and identification of phenomena by empirical and theoretical investigation to enable phenomena to be explained. It does not implicate any one kind of evidence, nor any one research method or practice to obtain it. The natural sciences are associated with particular sorts of phenomena, evidence and practices, *most* of which *most* social sciences cannot follow. But the *idea of science* – the generic commitment to observation, description and identification of phenomena by empirical and theoretical investigation in order to explain – remains very strong in science-affirmers. Their commitments to the idea of science do not privilege any one kind of evidence or any one research method or practice for collecting it, unlike the science-loyalists whose preference for numerate data via quantitative methods is a fetish.

Gone, however, are the commitments that privilege the natural sciences’ practice of science, which the science-loyalists in social science seek to emulate, such as causation, deduction, the development of universal law-like

generalizations and (it follows on naturally) prediction. It is the absence of these sorts of practices that provoke the regular complaint that the social sciences are not scientific enough;²¹ but this is just one mode for practising the idea of science.

More openness and tolerance about what science means might end the science wars. The meaning of the term 'science', however, tends to be narrowed into specific sets of methods and practices that implement it, not the generic idea of science. Science-affirmers believe strongly in the *idea of science* and in practising it; what they practise in terms of methods just happens to vary from natural scientists and, on the whole, from science-loyalists in the social sciences. It is for this reason I have avoided use of the terms 'hard' and 'soft' sciences to describe the difference between the science-loyalists in social science (along with natural science) and the science-affirmers, although this is a very popular characterization, since 'soft' is a pejorative term and it conceals that the generic idea of science unites them all.

So what is social science?

We have arrived finally at our conclusion, where the previous arguments can be brought together into a general definition of social science.

Social science is the observation, description and identification of the social nature of society by empirical and theoretical investigation, in order to explain what culture, the market and the state mean to people, groups and institutions, how they understand, make sense and reproduce culture, markets and the state across time and space; and what people, groups and institutions believe, how they act and interrelate in culture, the market and the state, in local, national and global settings.

Put more succinctly, social science is the scientific study of the processes of societal production and reproduction in culture, the market and the state across time and space.

²¹ For example, it is a recurring complaint from science-loyalists within social science down the generations that the social sciences are not predictive enough and need to be made more so. In the 1950s, see Madge (1953: 290), in the 1990s Horowitz (1995) and more recently Taagepera (2008).

Generic definitions such as this, however, confront the problem of disciplinary closure which separates the social sciences into distinct intellectual fields and arenas. There is nothing sacrosanct about the current configurations of social sciences (see Abbott 2001 for a discussion of how configurations can and have changed). Disciplines are not naturally differentiated, nor for once and all time, since new issues can emerge and internal practices of specialization change. Bridges are built between some of them, and drawbridges pulled up behind others. However, tendencies towards disciplinarity are strong; strong enough to make many social scientists reluctant to define generic social science and to want instead to list the disciplines that comprise it. Disciplinarity needs to be addressed, therefore, if a new public social science is to be articulated with a special public value.

Disciplinarity and disciplinary closure in the social sciences

It is deeply paradoxical that, at a time when the big issues facing the future of humankind are multifaceted and require post-disciplinarity, the social science disciplines remain separated into their own silos. Even more so that disciplinary closure is encouraged by some aspects of higher education policy itself. While the effects of policy are contradictory in this respect, some areas encourage disciplinarity by evaluating and assessing subjects individually in teaching and research terms, funding their research separately, allocating PhD student quotas according to disciplines and, until recently, also undergraduate student places. The audit culture that has been imposed on British higher education institutions (HEIs) over recent years, which we will explore further in Chapter 3, reinforces disciplinarity as a defence; subjects look to their survival and continuity because the audit culture increases their sense of being under threat. They exist, perhaps, not so much in silos as bunkers.

British academic culture, moreover, forces a huge divide between the humanities, natural science and the social sciences, which according to Kagan (2009) constitute themselves as three separate cultures. But even where the cultural barriers are breaking down – as they are under higher education policies that promote interdisciplinarity and which fund some cross-culture research initiatives – this highlights the contradictions in policy, for it is

happening only slowly and at the edges. Proponents of interdisciplinarity universally complain that they encounter an academic system that has not yet found ways of dealing with cross-disciplinary activity, much less funding, measuring and assessing it (the Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003, was strongly in favour of interdisciplinarity as a future strategy for the social sciences in Britain and make this point strongly).

However, while higher education policy is counterproductive in reinforcing disciplinarity, the bunker mentality of most disciplines is primarily the result of practices by the subjects themselves. It is practitioners who practise disciplinarity. This is why the response to the emergence of multidisciplinary administrative units in HEIs, has mostly been one of complaint and fear at the threat of subject fragmentation. Single subject schools are looked on with nostalgic fondness by most academics, a remembrance of times past and things lost (as much for the democratic ethos that came with their single disciplinary identity).

This strong sense of disciplinarity among practitioners occurs simultaneous with the rise of joint degrees in HEIs, the emergence of interdisciplinary degrees, such as women's studies, peace studies, security studies and the like, and, under the modular structure, the capacity for students to make a cafeteria style selection of courses that fit inaptly under a single subject name. This reflects both that some students' preferences are not disciplinary based and, since it is HEI staff teaching them, not all practitioners work in silos.

The push towards interdisciplinarity, however, meets strong forces of resistance. The subject of women's studies, for example, has more or less moved out of the undergraduate market in Britain, in large part because of the inability to persuade departments to free-up staff time to teach courses under pressure from discipline-based teaching and research assessment exercises. Development studies, a rich amalgam of economics, sociology and politics, with some anthropology alongside, has gone much the same way. Peace studies is very small in the United Kingdom compared with the United States.²² And while new subject areas are burgeoning as research

²² It is interesting to speculate that the strong survival of women studies as an undergraduate programme in the United States, for example, and the expanding presence of peace studies in the undergraduate curriculum there, is because the United States has escaped so much of the audit culture that characterizes British higher education policy, although the prevalence of peace studies is also linked to the place of civics in US education. There is greater institutional conservatism in British HEIs and the 'A' level curricula reinforces this.

interests – transitional justice studies, security studies, memory studies, auto/biography and narrative studies, sexuality studies, cultural studies – on the whole they are not establishing themselves as undergraduate degree subjects because of the ethos of disciplinarity. Even long-established and very popular interdisciplinary subjects with their own degrees, like criminology and media studies, find themselves located in more established disciplinary ‘homes’, such as law, sociology, social policy, English and communications, and have not emerged as units in their own right for research quality assessment purposes.²³ And practitioners in these established disciplines often express anxiety at the threat the newcomers pose to their own student quotas, staff numbers and research opportunities. Only where there is no competition for prime undergraduate income (and now fees), such as at the taught postgraduate level, do these interdisciplinary subjects thrive as degree topics.

The rise of interdisciplinary administrative units, therefore, has not impugned disciplinarity to any great extent because disciplinary closure is reproduced effortlessly in government higher education policy and disciplinary practices within each of the subjects. Disciplinarity is the norm. There are also historical reasons for this.

Disciplinarity is inherent to the professionalization of the separate disciplines as they emerged out of natural and moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The very success of their progress and development since then has been premised on their separation into specialized subject areas, with boundaries protected by disciplinary practices that reinforced this separation. Professionalization perforce obligated separation. Their common roots are, thus, overlooked. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the ‘histories of thought’-type courses that once proliferated in the separate subjects. While the history of ideas was very popular in economics, sociology, anthropology, politics and, to a lesser extent, psychology, ‘classical theory’ courses are falling out of fashion in the curriculum. Yet it was always a disciplinary history that was taught, rarely an interdisciplinary one. This is despite the enduring popularity of journals catering for this interest among researchers, a few of which are interdisciplinary, such as the *Journal for the History of the Human Sciences*. Common heritage and shared lineage is underplayed to exaggerate

²³ Media studies, for example, finds itself in a panel with communication, cultural studies and library and information management (panel 36 in the 2014 REF).

disciplinary differences (Abbott 2001, refers to this as the 'chaos of disciplines'). The separate social sciences have a tendency to envision their histories in disciplinary terms because, to adopt Freud's term from another context, they suffer from the narcissism of small differences.

Conclusion

The power and influence of the social sciences have been undermined by their Balkanization. This is why it is so important to show their essential unity. The narcissism of small differences pulls the social sciences apart in order to exaggerate their individual distinctiveness. This has the effect of minimizing the sense among practitioners that there is a generic social science. I have argued that social science is a unified intellectual field. It is given coherence both by its subject matter, the *social* nature of society across time and place, and by its scientific practices, the objective observation and explanation of this subject matter. That society is an inclusive entity and can be expanded into arenas like culture, the market and the state reinforces the essential unity afforded by this subject matter; and that social science practices differ in their degrees of conformity to the idea of science, matters less than the common commitment to empirical and theoretical observation and explanation. To draw on Peter Winch's title again (1958), the *idea* of a social science is a very good one. And British practitioners are very good at it.