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Conclusion: A Social Science for the Twenty-First Century?

There are, I believe, social science cohorts. These are very specific generations of social scientists affected by the distinctive and marked conditions, debates, ideas and experiences around at the time of their entry into the profession that remain as enduring legacies throughout their career. Not all generations face remarkable times that leave a permanent imprint but I have evoked two of these cohorts in my interpretative essay, the eighteenth-century Scots and the nineteenth-century Victorian scientific reformers, and have suggested we might learn something from them. In the first case, the example is the necessity to understand culture, the market and the state through humankind's tendency towards moral sentiment and sociability, the second is attaching this normative commitment to the practice of science, thereby linking the value of human and social betterment with the value of science. Both cohorts, of course, were hope makers and myth makers at the same time, full of vision for what social science could do but unable to deliver on it. In that sense they might make poor models.

Two recent cohorts of social science also come to mind. The first is the 1960s, the 'golden age' of optimism in social science, when social scientists believed they could change the world; the second is the 1980s, when fear, contraction and threat abounded, in which the social sciences were explicitly under attack. The 1960s left a legacy of openly normative commitment that largely went unfulfilled, resulting in a cynical, naysayer mentality of critique of systems of formal power that ended up in most practitioners in withdrawal under a preference for identifying the complexities and difficulties of trying to make a difference to ordinary people's lives. The 1980s by contrast gave us doubt, in which social scientists hunkered down within disciplinary bunkers, distancing themselves from the disappointments of the 1960s by generating professional knowledge designed primarily for each other. Hope making and myth making gave way to solid – depressed – realism about the limits of social

science and very little wish to try to make a difference. The legacy of both cohorts, therefore, is social science for 'ourselves alone' – either because public engagement is rejected or too complex to achieve.

The intellectual adventure I have been on to define the public value of social science and the new public social science that implements it, encounters the cultural remnants of these cohorts, and will be unpopular (and irritating) as a result. These cultural legacies are found in the contemporary fashion for 'science rejectionism', as I have called it, in the preference for the naysayer role of critique that has given up trying to make a difference, in the withdrawal of professional social science from public engagement in favour of narrow scientific abstraction, and in the partisanship that engages only with certain sorts of organic and community publics, portraying social science as complicit with the powerful if it engages upwards. A social science for the twenty-first century, however, needs to be scientifically skilled in its analysis as well as court moral experience, to be publicly enlightening but not partisan in the publics it engages, to be hope making with a better notion of science so that it does not disappoint and end up again as myth making. This is, of course, a return to earlier notions of public social science, found in eighteenth-century Scots and the nineteenth-century Victorian reformers, but grounded on better science and different moral sentiments more suited to the twenty-first century.

I am suggesting, therefore, that social science is on the cusp of a new age, deeply rooted in the past, but facing different conditions, debates, ideas and experiences. I want to close this interpretative essay, therefore, by asking two closely related questions about twenty-first-century social science. What is it about the twenty-first century that poses problems for social science? What are the challenges of these problems for the practice of social scientists?

In the course of this essay, I have identified the following problems that will shape public social science in the twenty-first century and to which it has to respond.

- A set of interconnected and complex 'wicked problems' that constitute themselves as dramatic public issues affecting the future of humankind and which call for 'big science'.
- Neoliberal marketization of higher education and the degradation of the public university that reflects in contraction and cuts in public expenditure and which limit the potential for 'big science'.

- A humanitarian revolution that motivates ethical universalism, signalled by the awareness of distant suffering and the material plight of 'strange' others, reflected in a cosmopolitan imagination that requires social science to make a difference through its practice.
- The fragmentation of power that has led to the empowerment of a variety of different publics, divided by religion, gender, nation, lifestyle and consumption (such as 'green' and 'ethical consumers') and the like, which requires we adopt a pluralist and non-partisan notion of the publics we need to engage through our social science.

These problems pose serious challenges to social science and I have rehearsed on several occasions throughout the text the ways in which social science practice needs to adapt to them. I believe they constrain as well as empower social science, existing as threats and opportunities. It is no exaggeration to say that social science is under threat, nor fantasy to suggest that the future of humankind is under threat. Public social science is a necessary response to both. It defends social science by making it relevant to the twenty-first century, with a post-disciplinary teaching, research and civic engagement agenda directed to analysing, explaining and solving the major public issues of our time. It fits the political economy of late modernity that has bequeathed humankind with complex stubborn problems that can no longer be addressed from within disciplinary bunkers. This notion of post-disciplinary public social science inevitably makes social science significant also to the humanitarian future that lies ahead, with a public value that renders social science into a public good in its own right independent of whatever use or price value it may have. It fits the humanitarian revolution that is occurring in late modernity as humankind is becoming aware of the need to live ethically and act politically in ways that make moral sentiment and sympathetic imagination towards distant others an ethical universalism. It is, if you like, a public social science for its time (readers who wish to see an example from my own work should read **Vignette 14**).

What, thus, is left for a particularly social science perspective? Have I not argued, in fact, for the elimination of social science in a polyglot post-disciplinary mash, with no distinctiveness left for social science?

I do not see that I have. Iain Wilkinson, associated closely with pioneering work on the sociology of suffering (2005), is worth quoting at length on what

Vignette 14 Public social science in practice – Compromise after Conflict Research Programme

This project is funded by The Leverhulme Trust and is a £1.26 million, five year programme (2009–14) at the University of Aberdeen that is addressed to the problem of what compromise means for victims of communal violence and how it might be encouraged and developed as both a social practice by erstwhile enemies themselves and a policy option by government and civil society. It is led by John Brewer (sociology) with Bernie Hayes (sociology) and Francis Teeney (psychology) as co-investigators, and has Post Doctoral Fellows (PDFs) with backgrounds in social anthropology and Latin American studies (Caumartin), sociology (Mueller-Hirth) and psychology (Dudgeon). It is designed to capture the lived experience of victims in three societies emerging out of conflict, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka, by means of qualitative interviews with victims and nationally representative quantitative surveys (Northern Ireland and South Africa) or, where nationally representative samples are impossible, to generate, non-random victim surveys (Sri Lanka). Linked PhDs explore specific case studies: the deconstruction of violent masculinities among former members of Loyalist paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland (Magee), the role of victim group leaders in the development of social capital in Northern Ireland (Fowler-Graham), the role of the Catholic Church in managing memory after an atrocity in part of Colombia (Rios), the reintegration of girl child soldiers back into their families in Sierra Leone (Anderson), the recovery of memory policies in contemporary Spain and their impact on the school curriculum (Magill) and change in Catholic young people's identity in Belfast and Derry (Smith). The PhD students have backgrounds in social anthropology, theology, peace studies, sociology and politics. Capturing victims' lived experiences in a multi-method approach, however, is combined with abstract and theoretical analysis on the meaning of compromise at the interpersonal level – the nature of which is under-theorized in social science – in order to be able to define it as a social practice independent of attitude or value change. Victim issues feature in the teaching of Brewer's course on the sociology of peace processes at the University of Aberdeen, the content of which is complemented with videos, DVDs and other witness testimonies to bring this lived experience into the classroom. Some of the activists invited to speak to the class over the years have been from victim groups, including from Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland. There is also a programme of civic engagement focused around victim issues. For example, one of our consultants on the Northern Ireland projects, Jennifer McNern, herself badly injured in a bombing, is a member of the pilot Victim and

Survivor Forum in Northern Ireland set up by the Stormont government and is also Secretary to the 'Injured Group' within Wave, a major counselling NGO. One of the PDFs, Mueller-Hirth, is advisor to the Institute for the Healing of Memories in Cape Town in its work with political prisoners. Teeney works with victims for Restoration Ministries in Belfast and has a special interest in those suffering agoraphobia as a result of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Brewer has delivered peacebuilding workshops for Mediation Network Northern Ireland, with cross-community groups, and on four occasions in Sri Lanka, the last in Jaffna in February 2012, a Tamil area, with a joint group of Tamils and Sinhalese. In conjunction with the Asian Institute of Missiology, which conducts the Sri Lankan fieldwork, Brewer has initiated a project to bring together Sinhalese and Tamil widows and their children on a holiday break together, for which he also fundraises in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Brewer and Teeney work with Republican ex-combatants in Northern Ireland; Magee does likewise with Loyalists, where he teaches conflict reduction courses in hardline Loyalist areas. In the past, Brewer has arranged for Sinn Féin personnel to visit Sri Lanka for dialogue with the Tamil Tigers. Drawing on his personal experience of involvement with and social science study of religious peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, Brewer is working with Catholic Church groups in Sri Lanka encouraging them to greater involvement in the Sri Lankan peace process. This involves work with both grassroots church personnel and bishops (who in the past have disengaged from involvement with the peace process). It should be clear by now that this project brings together various disciplines and touches on research, teaching and civic engagement. It is motivated by humanitarian concern for victims but uses skills of scientific analysis to try to make a difference to their lives and those of the wider society. It is empirical and theoretical, normative and scientific, addressing lived experience while incorporating abstract analysis. It is both detached and publicly engaged, befitting the model developed here of public social science for the twenty-first century.

he takes as the contribution of public social science in the future, for his words speak eloquently and with a passion for future public social science that is inspiring.

I'm not sure that many will grasp the weight of [the] suggestion that social science should be involved with the promotion of social sympathy. It is important to make clear that in this tradition an appreciation for the human social condition is a moral encounter – it engages us in understanding social life as an enactment of substantive human values and that as social scientists

we cannot operate above the fray. It is often difficult and can be distressing (as I think both Weber and Mills recognised). Moral demands are made of the social scientist and his/her readers – both to work at understanding the moral condition/experience of people and to question the terms and quality of their moral commitments to others. It cannot be a dry academic exercise – it is a call to know oneself as a moral-social being and as a being morally embedded in relationship with others. Value conflict is inevitable and life conduct must be examined – if not, we may never gather an appreciation for the most important fact about social life, which is that it *matters for people*. In this issue the very condition of our humanity is at stake.¹

The wicked problems stored up for our grandchildren require the special insights provided by the new public social science, just as much as they do that provided by medics, scientists and arts and humanities scholars. The wicked problems have technical features relevant to perspectives from all branches of scholarship. Not all equally, not all the same for every problem, but there remain opportunities for the social sciences to bring their skills as analysts of culture, the market and the state to bear on a multitude of public issues. Public social science has much to contribute in representing and capturing the ‘lived experience’ of those distant others with whom we feel empathy and identification, as well as in understanding the material conditions underlying various wrongs. Particular social sciences may well capture different aspects of these lived experiences and sets of material conditions better than others, as part of their contribution to analysing the technical features of important public issues. There will still be need for economic analysis, social anthropology, human geography, psychology, politics, criminology, sociology and all the rest, singularly or in small or large combinations across broad subject areas to add their distinctive knowledge as the problem requires.

There is one final question, and I want to phrase it in the way that deliberately invokes the aggrandizement of Gould’s depiction of the 1960s when he observed we were all sociologists then (Gould 1965: 9): should all social scientists be public social scientists now?

Triumphalism is as inappropriate today as it was then and I am not arguing that social scientists all need be the same. The new public social science will exist – and thrive – at the point of tension between four axes that mark its

¹ In a personal communication with the author, dated 8 March 2012. Emphasis in the original.

special perspective as social science. These axes are continuums, along which individual social scientists and the many social science disciplines will place themselves differently. Below are the respective poles of each continuum:

- the representation of people's lived experience-abstract analysis;
- ethical involvement-detachment;
- normative practice-science;
- public engagement-contemplative reflection and 'thinking time'.

These are not antinomies representing once-and-for-all, mutually exclusive choices, and the position individual social scientists locate themselves at on each axis will vary according to different times of their career and particular teaching, research and public engagement projects. The disciplines that constitute public social science, however, must live them all as a constant tension if they are to make a difference to global issues in the twenty-first century and return hope to humankind. Our grandchildren will condemn us if we do not make ourselves relevant by practising them.