

On the Role of the Social Sciences: What Crisis Are We Facing?

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After a vivid debate in the 1960s and 1970s about critical and positivist theory, the late 1990s and 2000s have again been marked by a growing soul-searching about the role of the social sciences. The increasing sophistication of methods and availability of new data have created a rising tension between, on one hand, presumably “methodologically sound” and, on the other, presumably “more relevant” and social sciences. Within disciplines, these tensions have led to semi-organized movements: the “*Perestroika*” movement in the early 2000s in American political science and a European-centered call for post-autistic or “real world” economics.¹ In both cases, the mainstream of the field was dominated by methodologically-savvy approaches that gave greater credence to scientific validity, and only secondary importance to empirical correctness (or internal validity rather than external validity, to put it in ontological terms).

In parallel, practitioners and observers of public debates question the contributions the social sciences could make to current problems. The failure of social science to make useful predictions has aggravated its public image, most notably political scientists, who were caught by surprise by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and economists, who – as the Queen famously remarked – failed to see the financial crisis of 2008 coming. But the disconnection between academia and the public goes much deeper than simple frustration with the lack of predictive capacity. In 2013, a coalition of Republican US Senators pushed to cut National Science Foundation funding for political science research, citing its futility, with exceptions granted only if the results were relevant to national defense or economic interests. In 2016, a discussion in the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* pointed to political science’s lack of charisma, arguing that members of the field held no visible place in public debates anymore, with economists and law professors being much more present in policy debates and even the analysis of political institutions.²

At the same time, the publication of the book *Le négationnisme économique* by Pierre Cahuc and André Zylberberg led to a heated debate in France about the scientific validity of economic analysis.³ In their book, the two authors claim that economics is an experimental science capable of establishing verified results that are constantly under attack by pseudo-scientists using invalidated concepts to advance politically-informed or ideological positions.

From within and outside its disciplines, the role of the social sciences is thus fundamentally being called into question: with increasing sophistication and specialization, scholars battle over intellectual leadership, certified by publication and citation impact metrics. At the same time, their sciences, independently of their methodological soundness, are considered less and less relevant by political elites and the public. While scholars seem to have thought that

¹ The term “post-autistic” originates in a student-led movement in France that criticized neoclassical economics in high-school teaching. As it spread beyond France, the terms “pluralist economics” or “real world economics” became more common, sometimes used interchangeably with “heterodox” economics. British scholars took the initiative to regroup these strands in a World Economics Association founded in 2011.

² Frank Decker und Eckhard Jesse, “Fach ohne Austrahlung,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20.4.2016.

³ Pierre Cahuc and André Zylberberg, *Le négationnisme économique*, Paris: Flammarion, 2016.

methodological sophistication would save their fields from oblivion or futility, the downward slope of public recognition seems to continue.

Even more puzzling, the demand for scientifically informed analysis of politics, the economy, and society is rising and an ever-greater population of “analysts” of all sorts are rising to the task (cf. Marie-Laure Salles-Djelic’s contribution). However, the increasing reliance on scientific analysis in public life is accompanied by relativism among political elites. Most extreme, certainly, are the anti-scientific stances of current US president Donald Trump, whose tweets about global warming are considered insulting by the entire academic community. But even more reasonable political leaders consider that scientists often have little to contribute in contexts that press for action.

If the social sciences are at a crossroads today, the challenges are less external, linked to the nature of the multiple crises besetting capitalism and political order, inequalities or ecological crisis. Rather, the main issue is internal and has to do with the ways in which scholars can reconcile the relevance of their inquiries with available data and methods. With the digital revolution, data are now omnipresent, and data analysts are slowly replacing what Wolfgang Streeck refers to as “bureaucratic auxiliary science” (the most positivistic version of social scientific inquiry). If the social sciences agree to be relegated to a form of reflexive knowledge that tends to deconstruct categories, the place of the social sciences will probably decline even further.

A more promising route is to assume leadership in the analysis of contexts and constellations of social reality. In journalism, making sense of and visualizing data is becoming an increasingly large part of reporting. One may even argue that is replacing the traditional image of investigative journalism. Making sense of over-abundant data is a central challenge of our societies and likely to remain with us in the future. Social sciences are necessary to establish guideposts in making sense of data, not just methodologically, but also by providing analytical scripts and measures that can be tested and discussed in a variety of contexts. What data can be used as valid proxies for a more diffuse social reality? What data points are necessary for a given societal phenomena? What comparative contrasts are relevant to analyze data properly? All of these questions require contextualized knowledge of empirical contexts that social sciences can provide, be it from a historical, comparative, qualitative or quantitative perspective.

The analysis of contexts and evolutionary trends is very different from the production of scientifically validated “facts.” The relevance of social sciences would thus be to produce organizing principles rather than affirmations. This requires systematically considering the long-term evolutions and comparative contexts, as well as a sound discussion of methodological choices. Discussing and approving the pertinence of these choices is the task of the scientific community, with its usual publication and career-advancement criteria. The ultimate litmus test, however, will be the contribution of the social sciences to sense-making in society.