Social Science at the Crossroads: Dead-End or Light at the End of a Dark Lane?

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Introduction

If we take the title of this roundtable seriously, we see first that there is no question mark. So the starting claim, or assumption, of our discussion – which in fact seems fair to me – is that social science is *indeed* at the crossroads.

Being at the crossroads means that there are at least two paths and hence some degree of decision-making to be done. Naturally, both paths may look very different – one in particular may seem to be much wider, broader, easier, and hence more likely to be chosen for those reasons. Being at *the* (and not simply at *a*) crossroads, furthermore, would seem to suggest to me that this is quite a fateful crossroads, and that the fact of taking one path rather than the other is indeed quite a consequential, if not fateful decision.

The problem, though, with the anthropomorphization suggested by the title is that it is not very clear here who is/are the agent(s) of decision-making. Note that we are talking about social science being at the crossroads, not about social sciences. That in itself may be important and I will get back to it. But the main point I would like to underscore here is that, granted social science is at *the* crossroads, one of the important issues we need to wonder about are the dynamics that will propel "it – social science" along one path rather than another. Also, what is the degree to which organized collective action can or cannot counter some strong structural biases of the type I mentioned (a very broad, clear, clean, rich path-dependent road versus a dark, unkempt, run down, dark back lane). But again I will come back to that a bit later.

Two crossroads, not one

The first claim I will be making is that social science is in fact facing two and not only one crossroads. Even though arguably those two crossroads are related and connected.

The first of those two crossroads is what I propose to call the new *Methodenstreit*. The debate is an old one, masterfully explored in his time by Max Weber. What is the nature of human and social reality? And what are the epistemological consequences of that? Are humanity and sociality reducible to "nature" – and hence in some sense universal or at least revealing of universal laws that can be observed and deduced (Max Weber's "*Erklären*")? Or is humanity and sociality in large part an historical and cultural process,

hence only to be understood in context (Max Weber's *Verstehen*)? Is social science potentially a natural science? Or is social science by the very nature of human and social reality an activity that explores meanings and meaning-making in a great plurality and diversity of historical and cultural contexts?

This epistemological fight is a rift – arguably an irreconcilable one – with ups and down through time for one side versus the other. I propose that for the past forty years or so and with a recent intensification and acceleration, the nature/*Erklären* side is winning again – becoming the brightly lit, clean, and clear road (the Kuhnian translation of that being control over key institutions, resources, gate-keeping, and so on). We see the return of the naturalization/universalization stories and perspectives in a kind of triple unholy alliance.

(1) The first dimension of that alliance is the revival of rational choice and the imperialism of mainstream economics towards almost all social sciences. And I don't see behavioral economics as a deviation from that, quite the contrary: the nudge theory can be seen as a theory of reinforcement leading in practice towards a closer alignment of what individuals really do with rational choice type behaviors.

(2) The second dimension is the revival of biologism of various kinds but almost everywhere. Neurosciences are making headway across the board. Their progress comes with a naturalization of epistemology, as Quine would have said – where theories of knowledge are reducible to the understanding of cognitive mechanisms and eschew the cultural, normative, paradigmatic contextualities of knowledge. This is rampant in many social sciences but even more worrying is the progress of this perspective in policy-making. In January 2018, the French Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer put at the head of the Scientific Committee of his Ministry Stanislas Dehaene, a cognitive psychologist who has a clear tendency to reduce education challenges to cognitive mechanisms, an approach that is certainly strongly disturbing Pierre Bourdieu … wherever he is. A variant of that – even more scary I would argue – is the success of genetic perspectives: in other words, the revenge of a modernized sociobiology, not to mention phrenology. For example, in serious business school research nowadays people are connecting levels of testosterone with leadership qualities, facial features with financial misreporting, evolutionary fitness with managerial interactions.

(3) Finally, the third dimension of this alliance is the triumph of the computer model of intelligence. The tendency today is to start from computers or artificial intelligence as the measuring rod and the standard for human intelligence and not the other way round.

This triple alliance now charts the broad, clear, lighted, and enticing road of this first crossroads. The unkempt, darker, and messy lane is our capacity to revive and nurture social science based on *verstehen* and to fight for an understanding of the uniqueness

of the human and social experience. This is an existential fight for many of us. And we need to be aware of the performativity loops that have been intensely at work for many years and can be illustrated with this quote from a text written as early as 1972 by the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus[1]:

> Man's nature is indeed so malleable that it may be on the point of changing again. If the computer paradigm becomes so strong that people begin to think of themselves as digital devices on the model of work in artificial intelligence (and forget that this is a paradigm, coming to take it for granted), then, since for the reasons we have been rehearsing, machines cannot be like human beings, human beings may become progressively like machines … Our risk is not the advent of superintelligent computers but of subintelligent human beings.

The second crossroads can be labelled in broad terms "the nature of truth." Arguably it is in part our own doing – by "our" here I mean those of us who have deployed and followed a social constructivist and therefore critical epistemological path in social science. We have in the process contributed to the destruction of the positivist notion of truth and hence prepared the way for a post-truth/truth bubbles era. The consequence is an open competition, in which many kinds of actors with resources and organization can mobilize the appearance, symbols, and tools of "science" to defend particular vested interests and claim for them the status of "truths."

The broad road ahead is the post-truth era and the return to a fight between the gods, with no ultimate umpire and no end to it. The very unkempt and narrow path is our capacity to reinvent the specificity of science without falling backwards into the positivist trap. Needless to say this is and will be complex!

What is to be done?

So, what is to be done? You will note that from a constructivist perspective, this is the right question, not "can something be done?" From a constructivist perspective, there is always something that can be done. To build again on Max Weber, from a social constructivist perspective there is always some possible fragility in the iron cage, even of the most apparently solid, resilient, and entrenched kind. After all – the last tonne of fossilized coal is getting closer. And, as Weber tells us, in the end "entirely new prophets may arise or there may be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals." If there are crossroads, there is openness, there are alternatives!!

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1   Dreyfus, Hubert L. 1972. *What Computers Can't Do: The Limits of Artificial Intelligence.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

A voluntarist program in three dimensions

For a rapid concluding discussion and as an answer to the question of what is to be done, I will propose and illustrate a voluntarist program in three dimensions.

This voluntarist program implies first:

(1) Taking transdisciplinarity seriously or rather going beyond and above transdisciplinarity. We should go back to treating social realities as total social facts. Hence returning to social science as opposed to social sciences. Epistemological commonality should take precedence over disciplinary boundaries. We need to work together to become audible again and propose alternative stories, perspectives, policies. The International Panel for Social Progress (IPSP) represents a great example of this type of transdisciplinary endeavor, a project with a collective scope and a strong normative and political agenda.

(2) This voluntarist program also implies collective mobilization – and that means organization, coordination, and resources. An inspiration for how to structurally organize this type of collective mobilization can be found in the organizational dynamics that characterize the transnational neoliberal community and, more particularly, in the broad and dense transnational network that the Atlas organization has spun and nurtured over recent decades.

(3) Finally, as a third dimension, I would like to underscore the importance of long-term institutionalization and socialization strategies. Working on the education and socialization of the coming generations and ensuring the institutionalization of these alternative frames and ways of looking at the world are a potentially consequential mechanism.