What Crossroads?

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Adorno (who died in 1969) distinguished between *critical* and *affirmative* (or *positivistic)* social science (the latter he also referred to as *Hilfswissenschaft der Verwaltung* – a kind of "bureaucratic auxiliary").

"Critical" did not mean "practical-political": remember Lukács on Frankfurt: "Grand Hotel Abyss" or Adorno complaining about the student movement in 1968: "They mistook my theory for an instruction for building Molotov cocktails."

Missing from Adorno's binary schema were:

– "revolutionary" social science for and by "organic intellectuals" in the political organizations of the working class;

– "reformist" sociology as a master theory of progressive social democracy – advising policy-makers on "social problems" and how to get from and through their solution to a better future.

Critical Theory	Revolutionary social science	Reformist social science	Affirmative social science

Not quite fitting in here is what one might call "strategic social science": Marcuse, Barrington Moore, a long list of German emigrees working for the American government and the secret service during and after World War Two to help defeat Germany and Nazism. See also Talcott Parsons and others about the possibility of rebuilding Germany as a democratic society. This ended with McCarthyism and, later, the Vietnam War, when strategic intellectuals withdrew into academia.

How about today?

Critical theory continues to exist in marginalized academic niches, while affirmative-positivistic social science thrives. Interestingly, the two intermediate positions are almost entirely empty:

– There is no longer a social movement that would need or listen to organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense: no demand for whatever they may supply. The revolution,

whatever it is, no longer depends on correct social science as it seemed to in the Marxian world (well into the 1930s, and even the 1970s).

– The dream of a (gradual) transformation by reform of the capitalist into a socialist society has ended with the demise of social democracy.

There are two (or one-and-a-half) social locations for "critical" social science today:

– "Radical" sociology departments, mostly in Western countries: a world of its own, devoid of political influence (apart from militant splinter groups suffering from sectarian and other pathologies).

– "The public", where prominent (not-all-too-) "radical" social scientists are sometimes invited to publish op-ed pieces, subject to the logic of a commercialized and fragmented public sphere, and observed with suspicion by both professional peers and political militants.

Interesting: Adorno as public intellectual: re-education!

Apart from this, social science is remarkably well-established in academia, although its political ambition and influence are much diminished.

> A few years ago, at some international social science conference, I was struck by the thought that never before in the history of mankind had there been so many people as today so well trained in analyzing and explaining social life. Still, the most powerful political leaders produced by that sociologically most sophisticated generation – *my* generation – were George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, reelected around the time of the conference. In subsequent years I continued to be fascinated with the contrast between the progressive decay of the politics and economy of the United States and the star-studded social science departments from Harvard to Stanford.

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The original tension between affirmative and critical orientations still exists in a more moderate version, as a gradual differentiation between more "technocratic" (or "sociocratic") and more "democratic" orientations, approaches, and intended uses. The technocratic version of social science is, obviously, in far more demand than the democratic version, although this is not necessarily appreciated in academic teaching and research, and not easily admitted.

Here is an ideal-typical representation of what is, in reality, more of a continuum:

Techno-/sociocratic	Democratic
Affirmative-positivistic	Critical
Society as object	Society as subject
Advising elites	Advising citizens
Private knowledge	Public knowledge
Instrumental knowledge	Reflexive knowledge
Social technology	Political enlightenment
Manufacturing consent	Arming opposition

On the *technocratic/sociocratic* pole, the assumption is that societies are governed by responsible, problem-solving "elites" in need of exact information and effective tools for social control in order to realize their benevolent intentions. On the *democratic* pole, societies are conceived as class societies governed from above by self-serving rulers that need to be kept in check by effective opposition from below, informed by independently produced knowledge on the true condition of society that rulers would rather see suppressed. Delivery of such knowledge to the general public needs to be done through the mass media (which tends to be elite-controlled), whereas delivery of technocratic knowledge to ruling elites can be done, practically, face-to-face.

Some uses of social science today

(1) The dream of sociology as a master theory of political praxis in democratic modernity is long forgotten. The discipline informing governance under contemporary capitalism is economics not sociology. Collective-democratic self-realization has given way to individual-behavioral control through rational incentives, with economizing taking the place of democratizing. Sociology comes in, together with behavioral economics and in its trail, where control relies (must rely) on *irrational* incentives (on the model of the "Hawthorne experiments").

(2) "Radical" sociology is confined to the echo chamber of "radical" sociology departments, "radical" sociology journals, and radical identity politics. As a result it tends to overestimate its own influence.

(3) Mainstream social science sees itself more at the democratic end of the continuum, whereas in reality what it produces serves more techno- and sociocratic than public enlightenment purposes.

(4) In politics, social science (survey research, focus groups, and the like) helps governments with the "manufacturing of consent" and political parties with marketing their candidates and programs to a politics-consuming audience – in competition-cum-cooperation with journalists, psychologists, and marketing specialists. In both cases, society is treated as object rather than subject, empowering sociocrats rather than people, requiring instrumental rather than critical-reflexive knowledge (and paying well for it).

(5) Social science may be used for constructing the algorithms that identify suitable targets of advertisement and political campaigns, in cooperation with IT specialists, mathematicians, and the like. This may be the most important future use of social science, and a rather lucrative one for those who make it into the research centers of the Valley.

(6) Social science is mobilized for the production of "facts" for policy and politics – where "facts" are inserted in public debates either by governments to silence the opposition (and legitimize political action, or non-action), or by the opposition to raise the alarm and show the government to be irresponsible, incapable, and so on. Sociological "facts" are introduced as "scientifically proven" in line with interests pursued, and are subject to the general pathologies of policy advice (for example, "experts" on every side of an issue).

(7) Some branches of sociology play a role in media-sponsored "public discourses" by producing raw material for cultural controversies: themes, language, conclusions. Here they become contributors to a new culture industry – infotainment, politainment. Press releases by universities and research institutes provide supply for the insatiable demand of an overcrowded media industry inciting pseudo-controversies in a competitive public space. Themes appear and disappear in rapid succession; they are left behind as soon as they have become exhausted (in the sense of no longer catching attention when they are no longer new). The liberal bias of established social science makes its productions useful for attacks on "old-fashioned" ways of life – of those who do not buy culture war media products. Especially prominent today: constructivist attacks on average traditional lifestyles related to "the gender complex," with social science "facts" used to stimulate scandalized reactions among set-in-their ways "rednecks" of all sorts, and thereby capturing valuable attention.