

Exploring the Science of Society

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Abstract

The present article is an attempt to present a sketch of the origin, evolution, present and future of the discipline— Social Science. The author has strongly advocated that the Social Science had never been given its due place/respect in the world of knowledge. Author emphasised that the study of Human Society has always fascinated the intellectuals and theorists, but they hold different views about the nature of this study. Should it be like that of Natural Sciences or it can remain scientific with its own characteristics? Do we need to study human society in a style which is close to the study of natural science or it can have the flexibility to accommodate the dynamic strength of different dimensions of the society, such as pluralism, democracy and liberalism etc. Various debates in this regard from Auguste Comte to David Easton and Carl Popper have been discussed and presented in this write-up. At the end of this article, author has supported the idea of granting it the status of soft science, which, not only, uphold the scientific flavor in the study of social science but also, accommodate the unique characteristics of the discipline of social science. We need to encourage social science research at university level and community level to facilitate the generation of new knowledge in social science and this is the need of the 21st century.

Introduction

Human Society has become a complex entity; the more we try to understand it, the more complicated it becomes. In the present world,

when human life has become a web of crisscross equations, starting from nowhere and reaching out to another web, it becomes even more complicated. Some 40-50 years ago,

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we used to define primary human needs as food, shelter and clothing, as the bare minimum necessities for all living creatures on this earth. Gradually, with the development of civic amenities and the use of Technology in our day-to-day life, instead of making life simple and straight-forward, we have, further, complicated it.

Today, human life is multi-faceted, be it in the field of Social, Political, Economic, Psychological, Emotional, Scientific, Literature and so on. The question regarding the methods of understanding these dynamics of human life is a matter of concern. At all times of development, thinkers have tried their level best to comprehend this critical aspect about the study of human life. Another critical question that arises is where should we start to understand this web of human relations? This web could, further, be referred to as Society. For a long period of time, thinkers who have tried defining society have got entrapped in an endless debate about the individual and society. The philosophers of ancient Greek—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were the first in the series who reflected on human society, and they tried to project models in which society should operate. Thereafter, for centuries, Social, Political theorists and philosophers kept exploring answers to the same question. Many Romans followed the same line of thought. For many centuries,

analysis of society, largely, remained philosophical. Thinkers did not attempt to understand society in a systematic manner. In other words, they lacked systematic analysis of this structure and the working of human relationships at the micro level of the family and the macro level of human society. Although the Greek and Roman philosophers did construct grand models and schemes about the individuals and their equations, yet, they failed to look at the modus operandi of the workings of these Societies.

It's only in the modern world, that attempts to define human society were made on some systematic basis, post the industrial revolution. Human relationships were being looked at through a different perspective. It was at this time, that the social thinkers tried to understand Society through an economic perspective, dominating all other perspectives; or through the political perspective by belittling others. There were huge gaps in the interpretation of these different perspectives, with reference to the comprehensive understanding of Society. In other words, we can say that these different perspectives complemented each other, whereas, a few thinkers perceived them as parallel. This was the time when new structures of knowledge were taking shape, while, on the other hand, the French revolution, American Freedom Movement, Imperialism and Colonialism helped the evolution of large Nation-States.

Social Science Under the Influence of Natural Science

However, from the 18th century onwards, in Europe, important changes took place in the way of understanding of Society and the place of the individuals in it. Many significant inventions took place in scientific discovery to understand the composition of the physical world which surrounds human beings. This was the time when natural sciences were in their infancy and were trying to develop systematic methods for the study of the physical world and the role of individuals in it. The term 'social science' first appeared in 1824, as an inquiry into "principles of distribution of wealth." Natural Sciences were being increasingly recognised and valued for generating this new knowledge, which was called scientific. This growth of Natural Sciences gave birth to an enquiry, if such Scientific and Rational approaches can be applied to the relationships of humans in Society. The social thinkers of the 20th century were struggling to explore if human experiences and behaviours could be better understood with the help of these approaches of Natural Sciences.

The Industrial Revolution and the renaissance were contemporary to the Scientific and Technological development and laid the transformation for an urban, industrial and mechanised living style. Agriculture, methods of production, transportation and communication

brought large scale changes in the life of human beings and a greater variety of occupations emerged. In the Open the Social Sciences, Gulbenkian Commission Report (1999) it has been mentioned that the impact of the natural sciences, both in academia and the larger society, catalysed an attempt to introduce scientific methodologies in those disciplines that were concerned with humans and society. Along with this, a conscious process of institutionalisation made possible the establishment of the various disciplines of social sciences. Thus, the evolution of these disciplines and their formal institutionalisation has been a dynamic and continuous process, which has been in constant dialogue and debate with various other factors.

The influence of Natural Sciences has been significant to the growth and development of these upcoming disciplines. It's important to mention, at this point, that these early Social Scientists were not individuals with a radical outlook. Never-the-less, they were people who tried to obtain the scientific basis of the Study of Society. Therefore, they gave great emphasis on the need to analyse Social Life scientifically. Auguste Comte is known as the founder/father of Sociology, as he emphasised the need to analyse Society through a scientific method. This emphasis had significant importance for the development of the discipline. Auguste Comte revived the term 'social physics', suggesting, thereby,

that society was best studied along the model of physics. Thus, to study society, one had to be scientific, in the sense that the study should be confined “to the study of real facts, without seeking to know their first causes or final purpose”.

Origin and Growth of Social Science

The Report of the Commission, further, suggests that in the period of 1850-1914, clear divisions emerged between the disciplines belonging to the social sciences. There were five main places where these disciplines were institutionalised: Great Britain, France, the Germanys, Italy and the United States. Five disciplines were accepted as belonging to social sciences. These were: history, economics, sociology, political science and anthropology. A tradition of history was already present in some form and it became the first discipline among these five to attain a degree of autonomy. Around this time, a new discipline was formed and a new name for it was coined by Comte, called sociology. He thought that sociology would be the queen of the social sciences (perhaps like mathematics was seen as the queen of the Natural sciences). The discipline of sociology, itself, was formed through a conscious institutionalisation in the second half of the 19th century. Initially, the people involved in it were those who were associated with social reform groups. This was similar to what had happened in anthropology.

As is well known, early anthropology was largely done by explorers, traders and officials of colonial regimes. The institutionalisation of this discipline occurred when they were absorbed in the university system.

The human beings thought that they were capable of constructing their own laws for social and political systems. This fact, opines Wagner (1999), distinguishes that many techniques were presented by Social Science to manage post-revolutionary political situation. The mid of 18th century had observed the enlightenment of the human beings. Their tendency of being sociable and its effects on practical order of the world was central concern of Social Science. This metamorphosis into social science took place until the mid of 19th century. So, Social Science, from the beginning, has contributed in alteration of society-as foreseeable. In renovating society for the advancement, Social Science has been instrumental.

How Scientific the Social Science is?

Here, it is important to discuss the development of Natural Sciences that was largely affecting the Studies of Society. Classical mechanics, which was first formulated by Newton and, further, developed by Laplace and others, is seen as the foundation of science, as a whole. The influence of Newtonian thinking was so great that the upcoming Social Scientists, in their attempt to study the Society

using a scientific method, plagued it with paradoxes, confusion, and unclear interpretation.

Auguste Comte was of the view that a theoretical Science should discover the laws that govern the phenomenon which social scientists were investigating. Similarly, Durkheim, in *the Rules of Sociological Method*, outlined his view of the logic and method of sociological inquiry. He argued that, the first and most fundamental rule is to consider social facts as things. Thus, the belief systems, customs and institutions of society, the facts of the social world should be considered as things, in the same way, as the objects and events of the natural world. As such, they can be directly observed and objectively measured. Although social facts enter the consciousness of individuals, i.e., the belief systems of society form a part of the outlook of its members, social facts are external to individuals. They are impressed upon them by society; they exist outside the individual and can, therefore, be studied objectively as external things. In Durkheim's view, society is not simply a collection of individuals; each was acting independently in terms of his or her particular psychology or mental state. Instead, members of society are directed by collective beliefs, values and laws, by social facts, which have an existence of their own. In Durkheim's words, 'collective ways of acting or thinking have a reality outside the individuals. Social facts, therefore,

constrain individuals to behave in particular ways. The explanation of human behaviour, thus, involves an examination of how that behaviour is shaped by social facts. Just as the behaviour of matter can be regarded as a reaction to external stimuli, so the behaviour of human beings can be seen as a response to the external constraints of social facts. Given this view of the nature of human beings and society, social facts are amenable to analysis in terms of the natural science methodology.

In 1897, Durkheim's now famous work, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology* was published. Durkheim believed that this study provided the evidence to support his views on methodology outlined two years earlier in *the Rules of Sociological Method*. He argued that his research on suicide demonstrated that 'real laws are discoverable', that social phenomena obey laws in the same way as natural phenomena. It showed that suicide was not simply an individual act, but a product of a social force external to the individual. Its causes are to be found in society. It is the product of social facts, of 'real, living, active forces, which, because of the way they determine the individual, prove their independence of it'.

In a series of writings on suicide, the British sociologist, J. Maxwell Atkinson, rejects the logic and procedures of positivist methodology. He maintains that the social world is a construction of actors' perceptions and subjective interpretations. As such, it has no reality beyond

the meanings given to it by social actors. Thus, an act of suicide is simply that which is defined as suicide by social actors. Atkinson rejects this assumption, arguing that suicide is not an objective fact that can, somehow, be separated from the perceptions of social actors. It, therefore, makes no sense for sociologists to treat suicide as facts and seek to explain their cause.

From a phenomenological perspective, therefore, the social world is a world of meaning. There is no objective reality, which lies behind that meaning. Thus, the social world is not made up of entities, which are external to the subjective experience of its members. To treat its aspects as 'social facts', as 'things', is to distort and misrepresent social reality. Thus, sociologists, who treat crime and suicide as anything other than constructions of meaning, are imposing their own reality on the social world and so distorting the very reality they seek to understand.

Social Science in 20th Century

Twentieth century, believed Wagner (1999), can be marked as a century when Social Sciences got acceptance not only at political level but also at the institutional level. On the onset of the 19th century, only a few institutions in Europe and North America adopted Social Sciences as an area of research and for teaching. But in contemporary times, institutes devoted to the study of society or social world are in abundance. In

1970's, the detailed analysis and assessments of the social sciences started to re-appear with respect to epistemology, ontology and methodology of these sciences. After a lot of experiments and experiences with the social sciences, this century revealed their narrowly set limits.

This awakening of society for Social Sciences has not been an easy process; therefore, Wagner suggests four major issues confronted by Social Sciences in that era. First issue is "rationality" of these sciences. Secondly, their "usefulness" for managing or regulating power. The third issue was related to the "structure" of social sciences, whether it should have disciplinary structure or it should be inter-disciplinary based as per the need of the society. Last issue faced was the "scientific nature" of Social Sciences in accordance with the circumstances at the beginning and the end of 19th century.

The revised version of positivism appeared in the early 20th century and came to be known as logical positivism. But, nevertheless, Newtonian Scientism did receive a challenge from the theory of relativity, which was, initially, developed by Einstein and given a new meaning by Karl Popper: The most characteristic feature that bothered Popper was the incessant stream of confirmations, of observations, which "verified" the theories in question; and this point was, constantly, emphasised by their adherents.

These factors when united made Popper take falsifiability as his foundation for separating science from non-science: if a theory is discordant with the probable experimented observations, it is deemed scientific. On the contrary, if a theory is attuned with all the empirical observations, like in Marxism, it has been altered purely to make space for such observations, or because, like in the situation of psychoanalytic concepts, it is in tandem with all the probable observations, is regarded as intuitive. However, for Popper, just because a theory has been suspected to be unscientific, doesn't necessarily uphold the fact that it is not informative and is thus, throwaway. There exists in all possibility, the chance, that in the near future, with the advancement of technology, that very unscientific theory can be falsified.

The Twentieth century is known as the century of Social Science. Ways of thinking, particularly towards the end of the eighteenth century were called Social Science not because new questions came into existence but because a spectrum of new answers came into sight (Heilbronn et al., 1998; and earlier Therborn, 1974; Hawthorn, 1987). A lot of it is owed to American and French revolutions, that is why Wagner (1999) put it as the legacy of revolutions.

The World War-II brought landmark changes in Social Sciences. After 1945, fast changes took place in all the areas of Social Sciences. The major reasons for this were the

Emergence of the U.S.A. as a major power, the political world wars now being defined by two aspects: the cold war with the USSR and the self-assertion by the known European countries. This was the time when the university system was being expanded in all parts of the world. The academia received and used these universities as a platform for experimentation and generation of knowledge in the field of Social Sciences.

Irrespective of the adulation amassed by Popper's Open Society and its opponents during the World War-II, the effect of determinism was unshakable, even in the post war period. The Behaviourism approach (unlike the behaviourism of the learning theory) in political science quests for an objective, quantified approach that strives to define and anticipate political behaviour. This approach is associated with the ascent of behavioural sciences and has taken shape from the natural sciences. Before the ascent of the behavioural revolution, political science's standing as a science was undecided, for the critics believed that political science lacked a scientific method of study and is overly qualitative and normative, hence, unfit to be deemed as a science. On the other hand, behaviourist methodology and empirical research were austere enough to confirm their study as a social science.

He described Behaviourism in the following words: "Behaviourism

was not a clearly defined movement for those who were thought to be behaviourists. It was more clearly definable by those who were opposed to it, because they were describing it in terms of the things within the newer trends that they found objectionable. So, some would define behaviourism as an attempt to apply the methods of natural sciences to human behaviour. Some others would define it as an excessive emphasis upon quantification. Another group of scholars would define it as individualistic reductionism. From the inside, the practitioners were of different minds as what it was that constituted behaviourism, and a few were in agreement.”

Other scholars have pointed out that science and culture have become closely associated in the post-modern period, most noticeably in the way that the Chaos Theory and deconstruction subvert the dominant values of established paradigms. TR Young identifies similarities between the Chaos Theory and Post Modernism in *Chaos and Science: Metaphysics of the Postmodern* (1991) arguing that the Chaos Theory ‘decenters’ determinism, certainty, coherence and order from primacy in science and, therefore, that it is compatible with the indeterminate parameters of the Post Modern culture. He suggests that the chaos theory displaces ‘all claims of perfection, finality, normality or historical necessity’ from the elevated, unquestioned

positions in a similar manner to Post Modernism and argues, from this, that the Chaos Theory provides ‘an elegant theoretical envelope in which to locate Post Modern Science.

The Gulbenkian Commission (1996) had appropriately pointed out that World War-II: the first thing to note is where this institutionalisation took place. There were five main locales for social science activity during the nineteenth century: Great Britain, France, the Germanys, Italy, and the United States. Most of the scholars and most of the universities (of course, not all) were located in these five places. The universities, in other countries, lacked the numerical weight or international prestige of those in these five. To this day, most of the nineteenth century works that we still read were written in one of these five locales. These names, as we shall discuss, was primarily, five: history, economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology. One might add to this list, as we shall see, the so-called Oriental Sciences (called Orientalism in English), despite the fact that they self-consciously did not consider themselves social sciences. Why we do not include geography, psychology, and law in this list?

The Gulbenkian report (1996) ends with a short commentary on the future of the social sciences. The members believe that multidisciplinary work has come to stay, even as they recognise, that due to the problem of resources, there will be constant tension between

new disciplines being formed and the consolidation of the established disciplines. Also, they strongly feel that multidisciplinary work must be institutionalised in various ways, such as offering appointments to faculty in more than one department and having students attached to different departments. This formal movement from one discipline to another constitutes an important mark of liberal education.

Alex M. George and Amman Madan (2009) *Social Sciences in Indian schools* states that Social Sciences are, in an in-enviable position. One hand, they are expected to shoulder the bulk of the normative expectations from schooling. Thus, they are supposed to teach everything—from a commitment to keeping the streets clean to the internalisation of a pluralist vision of the nation. Yet, they are treated as step sisters of science. Science is seen as a solid grounding for a lucrative career, while social sciences are considered soft, trivial and for the weak. It puts the social sciences at the centre of a struggle over the purpose and the meaning of schooling is—only about getting a job or to become a better person?

In India, we have over emphasised the institutional structure. We have

very limited number of research journals and publishers in the field of social sciences. On the other hand, our university system is not open to the needs of social science research. Our university system does not agree to inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary movement of faculty or researchers, so as to encourage social science research for teaching. The Indian bureaucratic model of educational institutions is always burdened with undue interference of ideologies and agendas. Our universities are still considering natural sciences as an important area of research at the same time, social sciences as well as humanities, are treated as step children.

As conclusion, I would like to say that social sciences and natural sciences have never been compartmentalised, as there has always been the influence of sciences over social science. In our attempts of discovering a science of society to the present day, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a science of society is possible. By the science of society, I do not mean devising universal laws or rules of Society, which would help, predict the future, but it should be to help in understanding society.

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