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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL

Volume 50 / Number 1 / March 1996 ■ 810 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019

Open the Social Sciences

by Immanuel Wallerstein*

[The following is based on a presentation delivered by Mr. Wallerstein at the SSRC on October 24, 1995, to mark the publication of *Open the Social Sciences* (Stanford University Press, 1996), a Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences.¹]

How were the social sciences constructed? In preparing our report we had to consider this question in order to understand the dilemmas of the social sciences. We start the story in the late 18th century by noting that the most important thing that happens is a kind of definitive divorce—I hesitate to use the word “divorce”—a break between science and philosophy.

Before that the terms were not quite totally interchangeable but very closely aligned. They both

*Immanuel Wallerstein is Director of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations, and Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Binghamton University.

¹ The Gulbenkian Commission was chaired by Mr. Wallerstein. Other members included Calestous Juma, Executive Secretary, UN Convention on Biodiversity; Evelyn Fox Keller, Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Jürgen Kocka, Professor of the History of the Industrial World, Freie Universität, Berlin; Dominique Lecourt, Professor of the Philosophy and History of Science, Université de Paris; Valentin Y. Mudimbe, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, French and Italian, and Classics, Stanford University; Kinhide Mushakoji, Professor, Faculty of International Studies, Meiji Gakuin University; Ilya Prigogine, Vicomte, Nobel Prize for Chemistry, 1977, Director, Instituts Internationaux de Physique et de Chimie; Peter J. Taylor, Professor of Geography, Loughborough University; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Krieger-Eisenhower Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Director, Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power, and History, The Johns Hopkins University.

meant knowledge, and people did not make a strong distinction between philosophy and science. It is in the late 18th century that we see the birth of C.P. Snow’s “two cultures.” Science was defined as the empirical, the search for truth through research, as opposed to what philosophers did, which was to speculate or make deductions in some way. It was a continuation of the break between philosophy and theology; this was taking it one step further, toward a thoroughly secularized knowledge system.

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March 15, 1996

Social Science Research Council

810 Seventh Avenue

New York, NY 10019

Phone: (212) 377-2700

Fax: (212) 377-2727

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Knowledge and the university

At the same time as this intellectual break in people's minds between science and philosophy, there occurs the revival of the university. We talk of the university as a continuous institution but it really is not. The medieval university was an interesting institution but it more or less died out in the 16th century. And the universities were relatively unimportant in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. They did not have permanent staff; intellectual work didn't go on in the university but outside of it, in many other kinds of institutions: the Collège de France, the Royal Societies, etc. One of the interesting things that happened in the 19th century is the recreation of the university as the locus of both the creation of knowledge and its reproduction. That involved something quite new, which was to take the faculty, primarily the faculty of philosophy, and break it up into something called disciplines, with chairs, and with departments that would grant degrees. The structure of the university as we know it today was really created in the late 19th century. So it was very recently that universities and disciplines as we know them were invented.

Between about 1750 and 1850, in terms of the development of individual disciplines, we see a situation where there were hundreds of names for research inquiry. What happens between 1850 and 1914 is the reduction of these hundreds of names to a small group of names which become defined as the disciplines. It's a kind of coagulation of sets of interests, sets of problems. Our report argues that in point of fact we end up with six major names, plus a couple of minor ones. These six major names become departments, national associations, scholarly journals, and library categories (the Library of Congress in the last decade of the 19th century reproduces these names as its set of categories). All of this institutionalizes a series of choices.

Lines of demarcation

We see the names chosen around three basic cleavages. The first cleavage is past-present, which was a cleavage between history, as it was reorganized in the 19th century, and the trio of sociology, political science, and economics. There were two rather different assumptions about how one achieved scientific truths. The historians followed Ranke's dictum that "*...er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen*" [it wants

only to show what actually happened]. In other words, you could only trust as evidence documents that were written at the time for purposes other than informing historians three centuries later. The fundamental assumption was that if an ambassador writes a letter to his monarch, he is trying to inform the monarch of a situation in the country where he is posted, and he is trying to tell it as he understands it. If you read it three centuries later, at least you know that is what the ambassador in fact said, and it may well be that it is what the ambassador really believed. And this of course pushes you in the direction of archives. It also pushes you in the direction of political and diplomatic history, because these are the things most likely to survive in archival form.

It was argued that scholars would probably have a bias about current events because of their involvement in their own societies. For this reason, the further they delved into the past the more neutral the scholars could be. Also, the objective reality of the archive would impose itself upon the scholars. Hence anything recent was suspect. In addition, states or other institutions tended not to make recent documents available to scholars. They still don't; state documents are secret for 20 years, 30 years, 50 years, 100 years or whatever. Furthermore, in order to understand the archives, you had to be pretty well-informed about the general cultural context within which they fell. This led historians to do work in fields with which they were most familiar, so there was a great tendency to work on their own national histories. At the same time, they were very suspicious of generalizations precisely because they were "scientists." That is to say they saw generalizations as being old-fashioned speculative philosophy, and in order to be empiricist, you could not generalize. In any case working with archives pushes you in the direction of detail, and detail tends to be terribly idiographic.

On the other hand, the nomothetic trio turned the whole logic on its head. In order to be objective, they said, we have to have data that are not subject to the judgment of the scholar. Ergo, the more quantitative the data, the less subject they are to the judgment of the scholar, the more comparable they are in various situations. And that pushes you inevitably into the present. Especially if you take the next step which is to say there are universal truths about human behavior that hold across all time and space. The minute you say that, it becomes no different whether you study

Germany in the present or India in the 5th century B.C., because you are looking for universal truths. Since the data on Germany in the present is 5,000 times better—harder is the word—than the data on India in 5,000 B.C., we study Germany in the present to arrive at our generalizations. That was the general late 19th-century, early 20th-century separation of history from the three “hard” social sciences.

We note something else: the sociology of knowledge. At least 95 percent of all scholars and all scholarship from the period 1850 to 1914, and probably even to 1945, originates in five countries: France, Great Britain, the Germanies, the Italies, and the United States. There is a smattering elsewhere, but basically not only does the scholarship come out of these five countries, but most of the scholarship by most scholars is about their own country. So most of the scholarship is about these five countries. This is partly pragmatic, partly social pressure, and partly ideological: these are the important countries, this is what matters, this is what we should study in order to learn how the world operates.

That leads to the second cleavage. The fact is that the five countries were not the entire world and there was some vague awareness in the scholarly community that there was a world beyond the five countries. What they did in our view was simply invent two other disciplines to study the rest of the world. The first and most obvious is anthropology, which was invented to study the primitive world. The primitive world was defined in a very simple way: in practice, as the colonies of the five countries, including the internal countries. In theory it was defined as the study of small groups which had a low level of technology, which did not have writing prior to contact with the Western world, which did not have religions that cut across groups, with each group having its own religious beliefs. These groups were presumed to be unchanging and timeless.

And so we get a whole ideology about how you study them. They are very strange people who speak very strange languages, from a European point of view. You have to do participant observation, you have to go out there, you spend a couple of years with “your tribe,” you learn the language, you get some people to help you as interpreters. What do you study? You study everything: ethnography. Because you know nothing, you learn everything: how they carry, how they exchange goods, how they handle

disputes among themselves, what the grammar of the language is, and you come back and you report all of this. It was very idiographic in tonality and was based on the presumption of ahistoricity.

This helps you handle the problem of a good portion of the earth but not all of the earth outside the five countries, or outside of Europe, because there are obviously countries that cannot be described in the terms I just used for anthropological work: for example, China, India, the Arab-Islamic world, Persia. All share a series of characteristics. They have at the present or at some point in the past one or more large bureaucratic empires in their area. As a result, there was in fact writing, and surviving texts. Furthermore, they had—to use a 19th century term—world religions. What a world religion essentially meant was a religion that had spread over a large area of the world. Buddhism was a world religion, Islam was a world religion, Hinduism was a world religion, as opposed to African-animist-local religious beliefs. These non-European civilizations had world religions, and they had texts which tended largely to be religious texts. The only thing they did not have was modernity.

The study of these kinds of social systems was built into the last field which was not usually defined as a social science, which refused to define itself as a social science, but in fact was the major social science from 1850 to 1945 dealing with all these areas of the world: Oriental studies. The premise of Oriental studies was very simple: These are marvelous, complex, structures that we have to understand. The best way to understand them is to get into their civilization, which means reading and learning the texts—philology becomes a very central technique—and presenting these texts to the rest of the world, while also explaining why they could not become modern. They were seen as frozen civilizations, and therefore as ahistoric. So we have a second basic cleavage: history plus the nomothetic trio dealing with the Western world, and anthropology and Oriental studies dealing with the rest of the world.

The third cleavage has to do with the existence of three nomothetic social sciences (sociology, political science, and economics). Why not have one social science? I believe this has to do with 19th century ideology. Basically the dominant world view of liberalism was that the state, the market, and the civil society were different entities. They operated by different logics and therefore needed to be studied separately,

and kept apart, in some sense, in the real world. In order to do that the scholars had to segregate their learning of these subjects. This is crudely what happened, and by about 1945, it was well established as the organizing principle in the social science divisions of most universities. In the meantime, in the emergence of the university system we get what we call the tripartite division, between the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. Basically that means philosophy versus science, with the social sciences somehow uneasily in the middle, reproducing the tension inside the social sciences, of the "two-culture" split. This holds true up to 1945. Then everything is changed.

The internationalization of the social sciences

We think everything changed as of 1945 primarily because the real world changed in several ways. We emerge at the end of the Second World War with a world in which the United States is the dominant force, economically, politically, and culturally. For at least 10 or 15 years it is literally the dominant force numerically in the social science world. I was very struck two or three years ago looking back at an early postwar UNESCO document that was produced by a committee of 16 people, of whom 15 were from the United States. That is absolutely extraordinary. I cannot imagine a UNESCO document today having more than one of the 16 from the United States. But there it was. Nobody thought it was surprising then that 15 of the 16 scholars were from the United States. What difference did that make? It made several differences; one is the emergence of area studies. The history is very clear, the motivation was heavily geopolitical. People were saying, "The U.S. has all these responsibilities in the world, it doesn't have anybody who knows what's going on in all these parts of the world, we're short of scholars, we've got to produce specialists of the non-Western world." Then area studies comes along as the organizational mode by which we are going to produce rapidly large numbers of scholars who know something about Africa and Asia and Latin America and Russia and China and whatnot.

Area studies is very interesting as an organizational structure. The basic idea was to say, "We're not going to touch the disciplines. People are still going to get Ph.D.'s in all their disciplines. But we're going to try to induce graduate students to specialize in these areas

and acquire knowledge by giving them a one-year program added on to their normal Ph.D., during which they'd learn a little bit about everything about the area." So if they were interested in India, they'd learn about the history of India, the sociology of India, the economics of India, the political science of India, etc. Plus maybe Urdu or Hindi or whatever. This was therefore—to use the classic word—multidisciplinary. The students would acquire this knowledge, then they would go on to their Ph.D. in some discipline and hopefully, they would continue to do their empirical work on India as economists, or as sociologists, or as historians. This was a highly successful program. Over the last 40-odd years it has spread beyond the United States. Many other countries adopted the same idea and we have produced thousands of very good scholars doing all kinds of work which was almost never done before 1945.

Now what does this mean? First of all it means that the cleavage, civilized world/rest of the world, is broken down completely in terms of the disciplines. Prior to 1945 you would have been considered strange if you were doing empirical work outside of the Western world and you were not in either anthropology or Oriental studies. All of a sudden you get historians, political scientists, sociologists, and even economists, floating around the rest of the world. If you think about that, it seems to undermine the theoretical logic of cultural anthropology and Oriental studies. The theoretical logic was that these disciplines had something special to do in these areas which nobody else could do and they had to do it in quite a different way. And they would do it ahistorically, whereas these people were coming in to study an ongoing, changing, transforming reality—that's why area studies was created. So it challenges the logic of the disciplines. Oriental studies gives up its name, the scholars join other divisions, they become historians or professors of religion. The cultural anthropologists tried various things. They decided that Europeans and North Americans have tribes too; they would study Swiss mountaineers and people in Chicago slums, and now they decide they'll study, "culture." They are in search of a *raison d'être*.

The internal logic of those departments changed as well. It isn't only that anthropology and Oriental studies lost their bearing but that other disciplines have to struggle with their methodological and their theoretical rationales. On top of that, since 1945, you

have the most extraordinary expansion of the world economy in the history of the modern world system. This means that there was a lot of money around, and one of the ways in which this money was expended is on the incredible expansion of the university system throughout the world. From 1945 on, there has been a geometric escalation in the number of universities, the number of university professors, of students, of Ph.D.'s. . . .

When we got our Ph.D.'s there was some mumbling about how it had to be original research. Original research means something that somebody hasn't already done. As the numbers increase this tends to be a bit of a problem. You have to find niches. So there is a natural process of poaching. Let's take my own field of sociology. One of the first sub-disciplines that emerges after World War II is something called political sociology. There was also economic sociology; a little bit later there was historical sociology. I am not even talking about the more esoteric sociologies: the sociology of tourism, for example, but those that directly impinge on the neighboring fields. I recall my own experience 40 years ago on my Ph.D. orals. One of my fields was political sociology, and some professor said, "What do you think is the difference between political sociology and political science?" a question which I must confess had not occurred to me before. I thought about it and I said, "Well, I can't see any." And I still can't see any. So we have a problem of overlap which escalates.

I go to quite a few different national social science meetings for one reason or another. One of the things that strikes me is, when you pick up the program of the meetings and you read the titles of the papers, it's very hard to know which congress you're at these days. The titles read the same whether it's sociology, anthropology, political science, or history. The overlap at that level grows daily. This was the situation from 1945 on. Area studies tremendously undermined the logic of the social science divisioning that was created up to then, and the mutual poaching also undermined it.

And then came 1968, symbolically. A couple of things happened as a result. First of all, one of the main themes of '68 was "the forgotten peoples." And the forgotten peoples got translated immediately into academic terms: women's studies, black studies, etc. There is a continuing creation of more names. These groups come along and say, We have a place, a legiti-

mate place within the university structure, and we would like to translate that not merely into writing books, but into having programs, eventually majors, eventually Ph.D.'s—although there was some hesitation about that. What you see with that process which is very strong, socially based, and not about to go away, is that we are in fact now moving in the other direction. If from 1750 to 1850 you had a lot of names which then got reduced (to about six as of 1945), the curve is now moving in the other direction. We are going from six to 20 names. When I read university catalogues I am struck with the fact that each catalogue has about 10 to 12 names. They all have the basic six or seven, but they all each add about three that vary from university to university. This will continue for some time to come.

Spheres of inquiry

Two other things happen in the 1970s and 1980s which are quite fundamental and which we talk about in the report. One is a major revolution in the natural sciences. The natural sciences were epistemologically very stable from about the 16th or 17th century to the 1970s, in the sense that Newtonian/Cartesian premises were fundamental to all scientific activity. Science was the search for the simplest laws. Science was objective. Science was neutral. Science dealt with equilibria. Science was cumulative.

What happens is that there has been a revolution brewing since the late 19th century, but it doesn't acquire organizational strength until the 1970s. It comes along and says science is not deterministic. All we can have is probabilistic statements about the future. Mathematical accuracy is impossible to obtain. Every time you measure you are going to measure something different. Processes are not linear but bifurcate. Science is the search for the complex, and not the search for the simple. And, most important for our purposes, scientific laws are not reversible. A founding assumption of the natural sciences is that time does not matter. But today many natural scientists proclaim that irreversibility is a fundamental premise of scientific activity. The slogan is "the arrow of time." Even atoms have time and are changed over time. Now this turns the relationship of the social sciences and the natural sciences upside down.

When I was a graduate student you learned that we social scientists were inferior physicists but one day we would learn how. We would someday figure out

how to talk about social processes the way physicists talk about physical processes, that is, that they were linear, they had equilibrium, that they were irreversible, that there existed universal laws. All of a sudden we have a major portion of natural scientists saying no, no, no, it's an arrow of time—in effect bringing the natural sciences and the social sciences closer together, but not on the basis of mechanistic, Newtonian natural science, but on the basis of premises that are fundamental to the social sciences. The movement is toward the social sciences, in effect. The physicists are saying in a way that they are inferior sociologists rather than sociologists saying they are inferior scientists. In any case they recognize that the social processes are the most complex processes.

At the same time there is a movement in the humanities, which I think can be explained in part by changes in the political world, which has led to the rise of cultural studies. Cultural studies is an absolutely major movement today. Its seed is in the humanities, but there are many anthropologists and historians who are involved in cultural studies, and this is spreading throughout the social sciences. So there is a blurring. Although the cultural studies people emphasize the degree to which their work is a reaction to and a condemnation of scientism, it is of course Newtonian scientism that they are really denouncing, which, as I've pointed out above, is being undermined within the ranks of the natural scientists. But what is striking is the degree to which cultural studies is really a move of the humanities towards the social sciences. What cultural studies says is that social processes matter, that what the humanities have to talk about are these social processes. Not only are differences within the social sciences becoming blurred, but the tripartite division itself—humanities, social science, natural science—is coming into question.

A program of reform

What kind of social science shall we build? First of all, we suggest that the problem of the future is not merely a question of restructuring the social sciences. We are not suggesting that they be made one. We are saying that the rationale for the disciplines we now have does not make much sense. And we had better try to rethink new rationales, new ways of divisioning. Note that what we today call biology, was called zoology and botany not so very long ago, and that zoology

and botany departments have virtually disappeared. Biology has many subdivisions, but botany and zoology are not the principle on which they are organized, so it is possible to redivide the pie in other ways.

We suggest that universities need to examine the tripartite division. It is built on a concept of the "two cultures" which grew up in the late 18th century and which we think should be overcome. We may be a bit chauvinistic in thinking that the social sciences might be central to that process. We even wonder whether the university will remain the primary locus of knowledge production and reproduction. Until recently it was. With the expansion of the universities and the numbers of people who go to universities, one of the things that has happened is what I call the high-schoolization of the university system, that is to say the enormous social pressure—you should teach more and it should be relevant and so forth—in order to get students with a B.A. into a position where they can get a job, etc. Scholarly professors have flown from college teaching to graduate school teaching; they are beginning to fly to institutes of advanced study. And we have to raise the question as we look ahead, 20, 50 years, whether we are not going to develop new kinds of institutions and, if so, on what financial base. How would you fund people doing research? Historically the university was the solution to the problem of how you fund scholars. You give them a job as a teacher, and that way you fund scholarship. If now there is a trend to push them out or they push themselves out, what will fund them as scholars?

One specific recommendation is that universities and other institutions encourage something that already exists on a small scale: the possibility of groups coming together around themes for a year's work. Second, instead of new programs being established every time somebody has an argument for x studies, we suggest that universities think instead of establishing a five-year time-limited research center on that subject. Then they will see what they can actually produce within this five-year program, without having to worry about fundraising during that period. (Funds should be obtained at the beginning so time is not spent writing grant proposals which, as we all know, is a very time-consuming process). Now those two suggestions cost a certain amount of money. We have two further suggestions which I think are even more important and will cost not a penny.

We suggest that professors be given joint

appointments. Nowadays it is usually a favor to a relatively distinguished person, in his or her fifties or sixties. When you try to get that person to the university, you say, "You can be a professor of x and y simultaneously." It's a courtesy. The second appointment is usually meaningless and you're not really expected to do anything about it. It's just a nice title, it makes the professor feel good. We would like to turn it all around. We would like to say: mandatory double appointment. No professor at the university should be in one department. All professors should be in two. When you talk in terms of their primary department, it is the one in which they have their Ph.D. The second department could be any other one. And in order to prevent a department from being resistant to this, we would insist that all departments have at least 25 percent of their professors come from another so-called primary department. We think this would transform departments. It would create new mixes, and it doesn't cost a penny. As long as you make it mandatory, it will work. Every professor must be a professor in two

departments, but in effect he/she can choose the second department. And the departments must accept this possibility; nobody can say, "Only our types here."

The same holds true at the graduate-student level. Make it mandatory to have a minor in another department. Now it's not only optional but most departments frown on it if you try to do it. You go to your department and you say, "I'd like to take x number of courses in some other department." And they say, "It's not good for your career, don't do it." We propose saying you can't get a Ph.D. in any discipline without taking a quarter of your courses in some other department as a minor. You can still earn a Ph.D. in that discipline but you must choose a second one. And departments must allow you to do it.

Those are the strongest recommendations. I think they would be revolutionary and as I say they would not cost a penny. Having made these recommendations, let me conclude by quoting from the last sentence of our report: "What is most important . . . is that the underlying issues be debated—clearly, openly, intelligently, and urgently." ■