

The Puzzle of Western Social Science

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1 Generalizations from European Historical Experience?

Introduction: Briefly, we can state the puzzle as: “Why does Social Science claim to be UNIVERSAL, when it is based on analysis of European historical experience?”. Many authors have recognized this problem, which manifests itself in many ways. For example, Timothy Mitchell (2002) writes: “*The possibility of social science is based upon taking certain historical experiences of the West as the template for a universal knowledge.*” Many other authors have recognized that Western Social Sciences is founded on European historical experience, and requires radical reconstruction. Our goal in this note is mainly to articulate this puzzle. Some suggestions on possible solutions are sketched in the concluding remarks.

Restatement of the Puzzle: Social Science is study of human experience. CAN we generalize from the European experience to universal laws about mankind? Can the tragic European experience of brutal religious warfare between Protestants and Catholics be generalized to all humanity and all religions? Does it hold for the Amish, Buddhists, Confucians? What were the patterns of war and peace within the Islamic Civilization, The Chinese, African, and South American Empires? Without any study or discussion, can we assume that lessons from European experiences will be valid for these societies?

Evolution of Property Rights: We have strong reasons to believe otherwise. Universal Laws are blind to diversity & evolution. As an extremely specific example, consider the evolution in notions of property, as it was shaped by historical circumstances in Europe. In 16th Century England, property was held to be a TRUST, subject to rights of public; see Tawney (1998). The owner could not destroy or damage it, nor withhold rights of access or passage to others, when it served the public interest. However, frequent battles for power among landed

nobility, often led to expropriation of properties of losers. This led to the emergence of the notion of property as inviolable right, not subject to authority of current ruling powers. This notion of absolute rights to private property is built into modern economic theory, without any recognition of its specificity to European historical context. To see this more clearly, note that other societies have, in accordance with their own historical and geographical contexts, evolved other conceptions of property. For example: The Cherokee Constitution of 1839 states: “The lands of the Cherokee Nation shall remain common property”.

2 The Human Experience and Our Personal Lives

Rational Decisions Based on Past Experiences? To understand this issue better, let us transpose this question to a smaller scale. Let us look at my personal life. Suppose I am choosing a career, choosing who to marry, or making other major life-decisions. Are there universal laws – based on past human experience which can guide me? Can I rely on past experiences of myself or others, to help me decide whether I should be an artist, engineer, mountain-climber, or philosopher? This seems unlikely, given that many career options open now did not exist in the past. During the space-race with Russia, NASA was hiring physicists in huge numbers, in an all-out effort to win. The market responded by producing large numbers of physicists. After the lunar landing, NASA declared victory and dramatically downscaled the space program. As a result, physics Ph.D.’s could be found driving taxicabs in the streets of New York. Past experience did not serve well as a guide to the future.

The Binary Opposite of Universal Laws: Even though truth often lies in the middle, focusing on the polar extremes in a binary opposition helps to clarify thought. Accordingly, let us MEDITATE on Uniqueness as the polar opposite of laws based on patterns of past experience.

Meditation on Uniqueness: I am unique: there has never been any person like me in the past, or among my contemporaries. My current position, geographical and historical context, are unique. My network of social relationships is unique. Any LAW based on past experience can only provide general guidance – to be taken with a large grain of salt. What if past experience is misleading? This moment of time never occurred in the past. The opportunities, threats, choices of this moment which I am living in never existed in the past. Use of experience would BLIND me to these!!

The First Time: Questions which face those in touch with their uniqueness are rather different from those who would rely on general human experience, or rational decision theory. How to act when past experiences, and laws based on them are a handicap? How can revolutionaries acquire the courage to think thoughts which have never been thought before?

Reach of human Intuition – the EUREKA moment! – Is outside the realm of past experience.

3 Secular Moral Foundations of Social Science

Uniqueness of European Historical Experience: We can translate these lessons from our meditation on uniqueness back to the Western Social Sciences. What if lessons of European experience do not apply to the Islamic Civilization? What if European experience is unique and distinct, and the rest of world cannot use it? As a simple example, no one can embark on a program of global conquest and colonization as a path to progress today. Some specifics of the European historical experience are neither possible nor desirable as models to replicate for all humanity. Gutting & Oksala (2003) express the central message of Foucault as: “*modern human sciences (biological, psychological, social) purport to offer universal scientific truths about human nature that are, in fact, mere expressions of ethical and political commitments of a society*”.

Hedging Grand Claims: I have laid out a grand thesis impugning all of modern social sciences as merely an ideological commitment, a religion of secular modernity, which replaced Christianity in the European intellectual tradition. It is worth noting that several authors have formulated and defended this radical thesis, on different grounds. See, for example, Manicas (1987), Winch (1990), Epstein (2015), Wallerstein (2001), and many others. Articulating such a polar extreme is useful in achieving clarity, before hedging these claims. My own expertise lies in economics, which provides a perfect model for my thesis. In Zaman (2012), I have spelled out how the apparently objective foundations of “scarcity” conceal three different normative commitments. However, awareness of the problematic foundations of the social sciences exists to varying degrees in different disciplines within the social sciences. Anthropologists have rejected the racist origins of their discipline, and re-built it on new foundations. Economists are at the other polar extreme, and remain passionately committed to the scientific objectivity of their theories, denying the possibility of value-laden economic theory. Other disciplines within the social sciences lie between these poles. At the heart of the battle of methodologies (Methodenstreit) in the late 19th century, was the problem of historical specificity: “how can we extract universal lessons from specific historical experiences?”. Hodgson (2001) discusses this in detail, showing how this problem was never resolved, even though the scientific and mathematical approach to methodology prevailed in this battle.

4 Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy

Max Weber & Value-Free Social Science: At the risk of over-simplification, we may at-

tribute current methodology to Max Weber's (1949) call for value-free social science. This led to a scramble to rebuild the foundations on scientific, value-free grounds in the early 20th Century. The impact of this transformation on university education has been traced by Reuben (1996). She writes that: *"In the late nineteenth century intellectuals assumed that truth had spiritual, moral, and cognitive dimensions. By 1930, however, intellectuals had abandoned this broad conception of truth. They embraced, instead, a view of knowledge that drew a sharp distinction between "facts" and "values." They associated cognitive truth with empirically verified knowledge and maintained that, by this standard, moral values could not be validated as "true." In the nomenclature of the twentieth century, only "science" constituted true knowledge. ... The term truth no longer comfortably encompassed factual knowledge and moral values"*.

The Entanglement of Facts and Values: The idea that facts and values are sharply separated, and scientific knowledge is based on facts alone, dominated the creation of modern social sciences. As Putnam (2002) writes in "The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy", facts and values are "inextricably entangled" in most of our social science discourse. It is not possible to separate the two. Social science aims to extract lessons relevant to the life-experiences of the 7 billion people living on the planet today. Any comprehensible summary of this experience will involve massive reduction, which will necessarily utilize values to prioritize and pattern these facts. Focusing on the European experience would lead to radically different lessons from those of the African or Chinese experience. Given that it is impossible to construct value-free social science as per Weberian ideals, it is essential to rebuild the social sciences on explicit values rather than concealed ones.

5 Concluding Remarks

The Way Forward: Hausman and McPherson (2006) have a book length exposition of how values are embodied within apparently objective and ethically neutral economic theories. In particular "rational" behavior is the Trojan horse used to smuggle values into the citadel of economics. Given that values are inevitably involved in the study of human societies, it seems essential to create a methodology which explicitly acknowledges a guiding moral framework, instead of concealing it. One possible three-dimensional framework is given in Zaman (2019). Social sciences should explicitly specify:

1. Normative: An ideal society.
2. Positive: Description of existing society, in terms of shortcomings from ideal.

3. Transformative: Effective policies to remove such shortcomings.

In fact, current social sciences use such frameworks, without explicit recognition or acknowledgment. Making the moral foundations explicit would add substantial clarity, and permit progress.

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