

Open the social sciences: To whom and for what?*

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Abstract

The Gulbenkian Commission Report (1996) on the restructuring of the social sciences disavowed anachronistic disciplinary divisions, Western universalism and methodological positivism, and instead proposed the unification of all scientific knowledge under what it called 'pluralistic universalism'. It exposed its own scholasticism, however, in failing to address for whom and for what is scientific knowledge produced. With these two questions as points of departure, this article develops a disciplinary division of labour, and thereby distinguishes among professional, policy, public and critical knowledge. Examining the form and relations among these four types of knowledge allows one to recognise the real basis of divergences among disciplines, and within disciplines across nations and history. A global perspective on the social sciences today examines the specific responses to market fundamentalism from different disciplines and different places in the world system.

Keywords

social science
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professional sociology

It is exactly ten years since the Gulbenkian Commission published its report on the restructuring of the social sciences. Chaired by Immanuel Wallerstein, the Commission consisted of ten distinguished scholars from the natural sciences, humanities and the social sciences. Their report, *Open the Social Sciences*, was widely publicised throughout the world as innovative, pointing towards a future that would dissolve outdated disciplinary divisions within the social sciences, while making their unification the locus of an ambitious reconciliation of the humanities and natural sciences. The Commission attributed the backwardness of the social sciences to a lingering attachment to ideas, methodologies and divisions that marked their birth in the 19th century. These antiquated notions, the Commission noted, began to break down after 1945 laying the foundations for an anticipated integration of all scientific knowledge. Driving this rupture with the past would be the rational development of social science, unhindered by false epistemologies and vested interests.

The Commission flattered scientific knowledge with its own autonomous history. For such autonomy is illusory – a distorted expression of the privileged existence that prevails only at the pinnacle of Western academe, and of little relevance to most social scientists, embedded in contexts increasingly driven by what I call third-wave marketisation. The Gulbenkian Commission was the project of an elite cut off not only from the actual

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practice of the social sciences, but also from the real world problems those sciences are designed to investigate: not to mention from the people affected by those problems. Rather than opening the social sciences, the Gulbenkian Commission was effectively closing them off, not only to the global south but also to most of the global north. Head stuck in the sand, the Commission was disarming the social sciences as it faces searching challenges to its viability.

Settling accounts with the Gulbenkian Commission is long overdue. We need to rethink the social sciences, not from the top down but from the ground up, rooting them in the multiple contexts of their production. We need to dispense with imaginary utopias divorced from everyday practices and explore the concrete division of labour within and between the social sciences. We cannot quarantine the social sciences, refusing their dissection for fear of disturbing a hornet's nest. We cannot exempt ourselves from the investigative eye we so gleefully turn upon others. If sociology, in particular, can disclose to others the public issues that underlie their private troubles, why can it not do the same for itself, turning private antagonisms into public debate. To transcend the divisions that divide us, or, at least, turn those divisions in a constructive direction, we have to trace them to different locations and trajectories within and through the scientific field. Spelling out the parameters and dimensions, the patterns of domination and interdependence within and among scientific fields should foster a more effective presence in the world beyond.

We begin, therefore, by endorsing the Gulbenkian Commission's identification of three problems that beset the social sciences, and the Commission's identification of three corresponding empirical trends. We then reinterpret those trends not from the rafters of the ivory tower but from the grounded laboratories of social science production – laboratories understood as fields of force operating in a world historical context.

Three problems, three trends and a totalising utopia

The Gulbenkian Commission identified three significant issues that must be at the heart of any rethinking of the social sciences: (1) the false universalism of Western thought that had underpinned the social sciences; (2) the anachronistic division of the social sciences divided by their objects of knowledge; and (3) a misguided positivist methodology that still dominated the practice of the social sciences.

These three problems were corroborated and accentuated by three corresponding historical tendencies identified by the Gulbenkian Commission. First, feminism, anti-racism and anti-colonial thinking attacked the social sciences as universalising the experiences of particular societies, namely Europe and the United States, and even more narrowly of hegemonic groups within these societies. Second, the advance of inter-disciplinary programmes and journals as well as area studies signalled the anachronism of divisions within the social sciences, divisions only maintained by retrograde disciplinary organisations. Third, narrow positivist methodology,

based on an imagination of Newtonian physics, with its predictable future and reversible time, no longer pertained in the natural sciences, which exhibited striking convergences with cultural studies in a common hostility to simple explanatory frameworks. Together, natural sciences and cultural studies pointed to a new social scientific epistemology.

The Gulbenkian Commission's crowning proposal was to unify disciplinary knowledge within which the social sciences, now combined into a single historical science, would be the field of reconciliation of the natural sciences and the humanities. With all fruitless oppositions thereby resolved, the social sciences would march forward under the banner of an unspecified 'pluralistic universalism'. Paradoxically, this was not a move beyond, but a programmatic return to the ambitions of 19th century positivism – the unification of all scientific knowledge. We hear nothing about how and where this new knowledge will be produced. Nor do we hear for whom this knowledge will be produced, nor for what ends. Instead we have an abstract and totalising utopia that reflects the concerns of Western academics, perched high up in the ivory tower, seemingly unaware that the fortress beneath them – supporting them – was under siege. We need to transport the Gulbenkian Commission out of its ivory tower, and bring the Commissioners down from heaven to earth. We need to start with the actual relations of the material production of knowledge, recognising how they vary by time and place. To advance the social sciences, I shall argue, we must not dissolve them, but create alliances both among them and between them and the public, around shared projects – alliances stitched together from below rather than imposed programmatically from above.

Knowledge for whom? Knowledge for what?

The Gulbenkian Commission suppressed two questions that provide a necessary foundation for re-envisioning the practice and project of the social sciences in the light of the tasks they face today. The two questions are: knowledge for whom?; and knowledge for what? In the context of scientific production we ask, first, whether knowledge is for an academic audience or an extra-academic audience: that is, whether as social scientists we talk to one another or to others. We ask, second, whether the knowledge concerns the determination of the appropriate means to pursue a given, taken-for-granted end, or whether it involves a discussion of those very ends themselves: that is whether the knowledge is instrumental or whether it is reflexive.

This gives rise to four types of knowledge that define a scientific field. *Policy knowledge* is knowledge in the service of problems defined by clients. This is, first and foremost, an instrumental relation in which expertise is rendered in exchange for material or symbolic rewards. It depends upon pre-existing scientific knowledge. This *professional knowledge* involves the expansion of research programmes that are based on certain assumptions, questions, methodologies and theories that advance through solving

external anomalies or resolving internal contradictions. It is instrumental knowledge because puzzle-solving takes for granted the defining parameters of the research programme. *Critical knowledge* is precisely the examination of the assumptions, often the value assumptions, of research programmes, opening them up for discussion and debate within the community of scholars. This is reflexive knowledge, in that it involves dialogue about the value relevance of the scientific projects we pursue. Finally, *public knowledge* is also reflexive – dialogue between the scientist or scholar and the public beyond the academy, dialogue around questions of societal goals but also, as a subsidiary moment, the means for achieving those goals. The result is the following matrix.

Division of disciplinary knowledge

	Academic audience	Extra-academic audience
Instrumental knowledge	Professional	Policy
Reflexive knowledge	Critical	Public

This matrix forms a division of disciplinary knowledge in which the four types of knowledge are fundamentally different practices, with different criteria of truth, modes of legitimation, notions of politics, regimes of accountability and pathological tendencies. This division defines a scientific field as a pattern of domination and inter-dependence among the four different types of knowledge. In this view, what distinguishes the natural sciences from the humanities is the former's emphasis on instrumental knowledge that is a concern with the development of scientific research and its applications and the latter's focus on reflexive knowledge: that is, a concern with dialogue about meaning, the fundamental values of society. The social sciences are not the reconciliation of natural sciences and humanities, as the Gulbenkian Commission hoped; rather they lie at the crossroads of these two opposed bodies of knowledge. That is, the social sciences contain within them the contradictions and challenges of combining instrumental and reflexive knowledge. From this perspective, the commitment to methodological positivism represents the professional self-misunderstanding of the nature of social science that sees it as value neutral and context-free, which reduces the four-fold division of disciplinary knowledge to a single quadrant.

We can now turn to the second ill that was emphasised by Gulbenkian Commission – the changing relation among the social sciences. In terms of our scheme, the separate social sciences are marked by different configurations and balance among the different types of knowledge. In the United States, the paradigmatic social science of economics is marked by the domination of instrumental knowledge while, say, cultural anthropology weights reflexivity more heavily. Political science is closer to economics, while sociology is closer to anthropology. More fundamentally, however, because of the importance of reflexivity, the social sciences should be

distinguished by their configuration of value stances, or what we might call their standpoint. Economics takes as its standpoint the market and its expansion, political science takes as its standpoint the state and political order, while sociology takes the standpoint of civil society and the resilience of the social. Cultural anthropology and human geography are potential allies in the defence of civil society. It would, of course, be a mistake to homogenise disciplines as each is a field of power with subaltern groupings that challenge the dominant standpoint of the discipline. Still, it would be no less an error to overlook the different interests that divide the disciplines.

At the same time, we must not forget the importance of inter-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary programmes that, at least in the United States, were born out of the eruptions of society in the 1960s, and continue to maintain close relations with their distinctive publics. They are not harbingers of some new unity of the social sciences or of the social sciences with the humanities, but, more usually, their appearance and then their persisting marginality reflect the overweening power of the disciplines. Indeed, the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and the unification of the social sciences could only be real in a totalitarian world in which there are no longer divisions among state, economy and society. In present-day capitalism, a unification of the disciplines would be artificial and coercive. It would necessarily reflect the domination of the market economy and thus be the incorporation of the social sciences under the hegemony of neo-classical economics.

We have discussed two of the issues identified by the Gulbenkian Commission, the limits of methodological positivism and the relation among the social sciences, and it remains only to consider the question of universalism. In criticising the false universalism of European social sciences, the Gulbenkian Commission created a new and elusive category – pluralistic universalism. We, however, approach the problem of universalism and pluralism more concretely – universalistic questions with particularistic answers. Our two questions, knowledge for whom and knowledge for what, generate four types of knowledge that provide a general frame for expressing variations in and inter-connections among local, national and regional divisions of disciplinary labour. It enables us not only to specify the differences among disciplines, but also the concrete manifestation of disciplines in different historical times and geographical places. The rest of this article focuses on sociology, but it applies equally, I would argue, to other disciplines.

The contribution of the semi-periphery: the case of Portuguese sociology

At one pole of national variation stands US sociology with its elaborate professionalisation, rooted in an enormously diverse and steeply hierarchical system of higher education. Professional knowledge did not always dominate US sociology. Indeed, in its late 19th century origins US sociology, like so many other sociologies in their inception, was predominantly public in character, impassioned by social injustice and a champion of moral

reform. Indeed, in part because it had a more radical and public agenda, in 1905 it broke with the American Economics Association within which it had developed. As the 20th century unfolded, however, sociology underwent its own professionalisation, becoming ever more inner directed as it competed with the other social sciences for a permanent place in the academic hierarchy. With notable exceptions, such as Edward A. Ross, sociologists removed themselves from the public eye as they became more oriented to their peers.

The field of sociology has a different disciplinary configuration in other countries, reflecting different historical trajectories, patterns of higher education and relations among economy, state and civil society. Thus, Scandinavian sociology possesses a strong policy moment compatible with the demands of a welfare state. The sociology of some Soviet regimes, such as Poland and Hungary, were marked by a subterranean critical moment. Authoritarian regimes, such as those of South Africa and Brazil that fell to a burgeoning civil society developed a powerful public sociology. Along these lines the division of labour in Portuguese sociology is especially interesting.

As a late developer, sociology in Portugal shows an especially vibrant relation among the four types of knowledge. Portuguese sociology began in earnest towards the end of the Salazar dictatorship and really took off only after 1974. Entering so late, it could borrow from the traditions of professional and critical knowledge in other countries, especially from France and the United States. This was no mechanical adoption, however, but an imaginative adaptation to the Portuguese circumstances – circumstances that called on sociology not only to tackle questions of policy, but also to foster a societal self-consciousness. With alacrity, sociology took up the challenge to reconstitute the very social fabric of post-revolutionary Portugal.

Some 30 years after the dictatorship sociology is still very much in the public eye. Sociologists are regular commentators in the media: newspapers, television and radio. Extended lecture series on sociology have appeared on public radio. Especially interesting are the open city conferences organised by the Portuguese Sociological Association, which bring sociologists into dialogue and debate both with one another and with diverse publics about local and national issues. Sociology's high profile can be attributed, at least in part, to the duality of professional sociology. A sociology degree is not merely a stepping-stone to some other degree but provides a meaningful identity and distinct occupation in all manner of organisations: in municipalities, schools, trade unions, media and so forth. In other words, sociologists are professionals not just in the academy or research institutes, but in all realms of state and civil society.

Its close association with 'socialist' governments has advanced sociology's policy and public roles. Sociologists have entered the political arena as ministers, parliamentary deputies, trade union leaders and at all levels of the civil service, while those who remained in the academy became advisors to the leaders of the country from the president down. Entry into the European Union in 1985 gave rise to a new impetus for policy sociology –

an avalanche of demands for mapping patterns of inequality, poverty, education, and for diagnoses of social problems from drugs, to prisons to mental health. The research is well-financed, but has to be delivered speedily and according to detailed specifications. Still, this policy science then becomes a potential vehicle for public discussion and the impetus for more in-depth research. Policy sociology reverberates into and energises all arenas of sociology.

Underpinning both public and policy sociology is a strong professional sociology. I have already noted how the Portuguese Sociological Association represents a certain civic professionalism. It is also particularly robust. It has 2000 members, which in a society of ten million, represents a density more than three times that of the United States. Moreover, sociology is taught in universities and in high schools across the country. There are a number of dynamic research centres, including those within the universities of Lisbon, Oporto and Coimbra as well as ISCTE: a founding centre of Portuguese sociology and a university unto itself.

Institutionally robust, especially for a small semi-peripheral country, the actual practice of Portuguese sociology has also a distinctive character. Reflecting and reinforcing the permeable boundaries between sociology and society is a proclivity towards ethnographic research – research that, by definition, is at the interface of the academic and the public. Unlike the majority of participant observation studies in the United States, which have been steadfastly micro and ahistorical and riveted to the ethnographic present, Portuguese ethnography – whether of urban or rural areas, whether of family or of work – lays bare micro-processes in order to gauge the character of the wider Portuguese society and its transformations. Indeed, ethnographic sites are regularly revisited and restudied to mark such historical change.

Just as the dividing lines between professional, policy and public sociology are quite blurred, similarly we cannot compartmentalise critical sociology. Whether it flows from the French lineages of Touraine and Bourdieu or from the American lineages of Wallerstein and Wright, critical sociology is intimately bound up with professional and public sociology. The relatively recent re-emergence of Portuguese society and the close links between Portugal and the global south, especially ties to Africa and Latin America inherited from the colonial era, have given a rare dynamism to the critical-public nexus, ranging from the emancipatory projects of the World Social Forum to international feminist projects to Bourdieu-style critiques of social domination and symbolic violence.

To what can we attribute the multiple and fluid connections among the four types of sociology? To what extent is Portugal replicating the same relatively undifferentiated character that can be found in all newly emergent sociologies? To what extent are we seeing the vibrancy of youth, to what extent the legacy of a peculiar history and to what extent the effects of a particular place in the world order? How did opposition to the colonial war and dictatorship create the grounds for a flourishing sociology, whether

by preparing intellectuals in exile or the formation of a critical intelligentsia at home? Did those same historical experiences lead to a self-conscious placement within a global division of sociological labour, connecting critical voices in both north and south? Will its distinctive connection to society and as a meeting place of intellectual currents from the world over be threatened if Portuguese sociology becomes more professionalised and its public become more cynical? Will the growing importance of policy science, pressures from European Union for standardisation – the Bologna process – the hegemonic currency of English draw sociology away from its local roots and concerns? Can Portuguese sociology manage to maintain its global profile without at the same time losing its national distinctiveness? Indeed, can it develop its specificity through its global connections? To situate the promise and the challenge of Portuguese sociology, and indeed other sociologies of the semi-periphery, in an international context is my final task in this brief commentary.

The spectre of third-wave marketisation

Undoubtedly, Portuguese sociology is a product of its own history and context that led to the selective appropriation of sociology from elsewhere, but its late development also expresses something more general – the potentiality of what I call third-wave sociology.

Sociology has gone through three waves. Its first wave emanated from Europe. It was a response to the first wave of marketisation that threatened the existence of the labouring classes, which, in turn, sought to install and defend labour rights with trade unions, co-operatives, utopian communities and political parties. This burgeoning civil society of the 19th century grounded the first wave of sociology: a sociology with strong utopian flavour.

Second-wave sociology had its epicentre in the United States and stretched from the First World War until the breakdown of the communist regimes. It corresponded to second-wave marketisation, which began in the late 19th century, was interrupted, and then burst forth again in the 1920s and 1930s, provoking reactions from nation-states that assumed the forms of fascism, Stalinism, social democracy and, in the United States, the New Deal. In each case the state sought to protect society from the market through the (real or putative) guarantee of social rights. Sociology, where it was allowed to exist, tried to strike a collaborative relation with the state. Professional-academic sociology in the United States was given a boost by policy science, whether the latter served foundations or the federal government. At a global level this second-wave sociology lasted symbolically until the last vestiges of planned economies had dissolved, although in the West the assault on policy sociology began much earlier with Thatcher and Reagan. From then on states became more inhospitable to sociology and its project to defend and invigorate civil society. States instead began to nurture the expansion of the market together with an offensive against civil society. Economics became the favoured social science – in some countries more than others.

Sociology has now entered its third wave, a reaction to third-wave marketisation, more popularly known as neo-liberalism, and more euphemistically as globalisation. In the present era, defending civil society through national social policy becomes less viable, and so sociology turns increasingly to the public for its audience, not only on a national scale but also on a local and global scale. With third-wave marketisation's assault on national civil societies, with the retrenchment of labour and social rights, sociology's task in its third wave, I argue, lies in the defence of human rights (which includes labour and social rights) through the organisation of a civil society of global proportions. This third-wave sociology does not emanate from the advanced capitalist societies of the north, but from the countries of the south – latecomers to sociology. Countries that look both to the south and to the north, countries such as South Africa, Brazil and Portugal become the fertile ground of a new publicly oriented sociology: the epicentre of third-wave sociology.

The impetus for a third-wave sociology with its valorisation of public sociology may spring from such semi-peripheral countries as Portugal, but it must still operate under the hegemony of the United States and Western Europe. The sociologies of these countries of advanced capitalism, especially the United States, command enormous influence, prestige and resources within the context of global sociology, and thereby shape the possible realisation of public sociology on a world scale. It becomes especially important, therefore, that alternative models for the division of sociological labour, such as the one found in contemporary Portugal, gain recognition and support within the United States for example, where sociologists think their disciplinary model is the only one, and where those with critical and public intent are overpowered by professional sociology. Third-wave sociology must sweep back against the ramparts of second-wave sociology.

We can now restore the Gulbenkian Commission to its historical context and recognise the source of its myopia. Even though it was written only ten years ago the Commission's academic detachment still reflected the period of second-wave marketisation in which state regulated capitalism protected the autonomy of universities and their disciplines. But this era has passed as states are bent on fostering markets – the commodification of research and the privatisation of higher education – and subjecting the academy to political surveillance. The confidence in the resilience of academic autonomy, taken for granted by the Commission, now looks sadly misplaced as universities across the globe come under assault from state and market. So long as the social sciences are differentially implicated in this offensive their unification becomes more remote and the proposals of the Gulbenkian Commission more utopian. In an important sense, we are, ironically, returning to the *laissez-faire* world of the 19th century and what seemed to the Commissioners to be an anachronistic past is now a haunting present.

The Gulbenkian Commission's linear history – social science before 1945, after 1945 converging on a unified historical science – has to be replaced by a combined and uneven history. By its silence about the very

different conditions that pertain in different parts of the world, the Commission assumes that all nations pass through the same phases of development at the same time. This is obviously far from true. Selective borrowings (and rejections) of knowledge from advanced countries combine with indigenous forms and conditions to produce distinctive national configurations of the division of disciplinary labour – configurations that vary by geo-political region as well as by historical period.

Today these national specificities develop in the context of third-wave marketisation, a phenomenon that creates divisions not only among countries but also among disciplines. Thus, economics and political science have provided ideologies to justify third-wave marketisation although, to repeat, neither discipline is a homogeneous field, but is internally divided into dominant and subordinate segments, a division that varies between countries. Sociology, cultural anthropology and human geography, on the other hand, have defended civil society against markets and states, although these disciplines, too, are more or less invaded by economics and, moreover, mere promotion of civil society can often buttress the power of state and market. Even if the configuration of the social sciences looks different in different societies, we can still surmise that third-wave marketisation is more likely to polarise than unify the social sciences.

To conclude, from the stand-point of opposition to third-wave marketisation, there is now real urgency to open the social sciences. That is, to open them first to reflexive thinking that thematises their relation to the values and purposes of society, and second to extra-academic audiences, in particular publics, and especially those publics threatened with the erosion of autonomy and voice. By virtue of their history and their place in the modern world system, social scientists of the semi-periphery are pointing the way forward – not retreating behind the walls of academe, but advancing into the trenches of civil society. Countries with older and more established disciplines would do well to take note of their example.

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