

**'Rethinking the "Opening" of the Social Sciences', presentation for Social Sciences and the Humanities Faculty Launch: 'The State of the Disciplines: The Future of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in the UK', University of Westminster, 4 December 2013.**

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*Introduction*

The demand for the 'opening' of the social sciences reflects perceived changes in the very basis of what social sciences are: how they relate to the natural sciences; how they relate to each other; their inner workings (what research might mean - both ontologically and epistemologically); and how they are taught.

It would be wrong to think that Faculties, such as ours, come into existence in an arbitrary manner, it is important to put what happens in Universities in the context of the broader social and political world. Exciting developments, such as the one we are celebrating today, are part of a broader secular trend to 'open' the social sciences and humanities, which has clearly emerged over the last few decades.

These changes were a long-time in the making. You could say 20 years - since *The Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* was established in 1993. We can increasingly see the influence, or perhaps the prescience, of the core ideas of their 1996 report - *Opening the Social Sciences* - which have increasingly come to fruition. Over this period every international organisation from the UN, OECD Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy and the EU, has argued that we need to restructure and 'open' the social sciences and humanities.

What is it we allegedly need to do with the 'opening' of the social sciences and humanities? We need to de-liberalise or de-modernise: to let in the fresh air of contingency, uncertainty and plurality. We need to do away with the disciplinary straightjackets created in the late C19th and run up to World War 1, when the social sciences and humanities were institutionalised in academia.

We are told we need to stop our ridiculous aping of the natural sciences, with the reductionist separation of disciplines and rationalist assumptions in the search for hidden truths and social laws. Here the social sciences are redescribed as 1) based on the modernist reductionism and mechanical materialism of the natural sciences (now discredited) and 2) we are told that social science was merely a tool for governments seeking to hubristically control, direct and socially-engineer their brave new worlds of the modernist nation state.

I don't think that these are the only truths possible to tell about the social sciences, but these are definitely the dominant ones today.

*Complexity and the 'Opening' of the Social Sciences*

The international experts tell us that, at long last, the spirit of the radical student and political movements of the 1960s has come to the social sciences and humanities – we will do away with disciplinary divides between sociology, history, economics, politics, geography, anthropology, psychology etc.

The 60s was the revolt against disciplines, hierarchies, secret knowledges, professorial privileges and the pedagogical practices that maintained these. (The victory of the 60s can be seen in comparing *Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 Report on Knowledge* commissioned by the Universities Council of Quebec – with current understandings of the limits of universal, reductionist and teleological understandings in the social sciences).

It took 50 years (of the 'culture wars') for the truths of the 60s – which when they were told were shocking, radical, anti-establishment and anti-hierarchy - to become our truths. Today we all appear to agree on the need to liberate student thought and experience from the drudgery of conservative canons of thought, taught by elitist professors who reproduced the dominant ideas of power and the hold of the past over the present.

What kept these arcane practices in place for so long? We are told that it was the self-interest of Faculties (superdisciplines) Departments (disciplines), academic bureaucracy, path-dependencies of careers based on narrow academic-training, journals/publishers and their protected empires, funding bodies, governments, capitalism etc.

Anyway, what ever it was that held back the opening up of the social sciences has seemingly given in. Complexity says that the time is up for the canon of modernist social science.

Complexity, we are told, has been able to achieve the aspirations of the radical 60s demands for the reform of the social sciences. Complexity says that the problems cannot be solved by more knowledge (more of the same). That the problems of the world are not matters of epistemology – of knowing. There is no theory that can solve the problems of democracy, rights, markets, unemployment, war, poverty, environmental destruction. Complexity says that the problems are ontological – the limits to knowledge are in a reality that does not fit Cartesian separations between subject/object or Newtonian understandings of fixed laws, empty of space and time.

Instead of developing social sciences and humanities on the hubristic and false premises of modernity we need to transform them - to 'open' them.

### *The Consequences of 'Openness'*

Openness is a great leveller in academia - making the social sciences and humanities more participatory, democratic and 'pluralist'. I want to briefly highlight five consequences:

Firstly, all the sciences are democratised. We no longer have to be in thrall to the natural sciences. In the past, many thought that social science was somehow second-class to the natural sciences with their test tubes, laboratories and ability to isolate fixed laws true across time and space. Today, all pretensions to 'science' are treated sceptically. The natural sciences have been knocked off their pedestal with the end of fixed Newtonian understandings of empty time and space – there can be no telos of inevitable or indefinite progress. The shift from uncertainty (never enough knowledge as an epistemological problem) to complexity (an ontological problem of processes and relations and interactions) constitutes time's arrow an ontology that the future can never repeat past. There are no timeless laws in infinite space above us or hidden structures of determination beneath us. Modernist, reductionist approaches ignore the interconnections of the world, the interactions which create side-effects, unintended consequences and new creative opportunities. We can no longer neatly separate science and politics, humans and nature, knowledge and non-knowledge.

Secondly, what does the opening mean for the social sciences? The crisis in the natural sciences is held to affect the social sciences – especially more abstract theorising. This has knocked the higher standing disciplines off their pedestal – especially the reductionist understandings of politics and economics – with the instrumental means-ends rationality of liberal forms of governing excluding side-effects and economic market rationalities excluding the externalities of resource limits, social coherence and CO2 emissions.

Third, it is important to emphasise the new ontology of the social sciences. No more reductive categories of individuals and states and universals and particulars. No more fixed, inner essences and structures and metaphysical abstraction. Instead we have concrete studies of embedded subjects and relational, associative, interactive, iterative, performative, process-based, non-linear outcomes. The divisions between and within the humanities – English, History, Philosophy, Law – and the social sciences seem much less relevant. It is important to emphasise that we are not talking about interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary understandings or any other 70s attempt to save the reductionist disciplinary core of 'scientific' disciplines. As Bruno Latour would say liberal modernist understandings plus all the excluded relations, associations, effects and externalities equals the social sciences we need today. We need a more inclusive, less divisive, disciplinary framework.

Fourth, there is also a new epistemology- a new research methodology – more participative subjects, more actors, more stakeholders in the research process. Distinctions between lay-persons and experts increasingly disappear. Knowledge, in a complex world, does not somehow exist separate to society, to the subjects of research or to stakeholders. Opening the social sciences also means opening academia to the world - not imposing arcane and abstract theories onto the world or making out that research subjects or ordinary people are somehow stupid or unknowing. Instead we need to come down and access their knowledge. Interactionist methodologies do not work on the basis of fixed laws and relations understandable only to the external eye of the scientist, but on getting down and

dirty with the object of study. Practice-based, object-based, actor-based, network-based research, 'studying up, not down', 'theorising through subjects not over them', 'taking the worm's eye view'.

Fifth, the consequence is that we need new teaching regimes – according to former govt education advisor Dominic Cummings – mass education of bite-sized information and specific technical training for the masses and complexity training in pre-modern philosophy, classics and complexity sciences for elites – to enable imaginative 'outside the box' thinking. We need to minimize the gap between education and everyday life and equip all students with the capacities to adapt to limits in knowledge. Rather than equipping them with a fixed store of information, which is useless in a complex world, they need 'life-skills' – the ability to deconstruct an advert rather than to understand Shakespeare, how to invest sensibly rather than understanding Marx's theory of the rate of profit to fall. Shadow Education Minister Tristram Hunt has written in the *Guardian* about the need to reinvent the polytechnic, for example.

### *Conclusion*

The opening of the social sciences and humanities seems to us today to be inevitable and the only question it poses is why it took us so long. Today it seems that we have spent twenty years twiddling our thumbs, critiquing our disciplines, just waiting for the new spirit of 'openness' to put us out of our misery.

In IR everything about IR before 1990 is dismissed in the first lecture on Realism – then we get on to the interesting non-IR theorising – the same thing occurs in politics, history, geography, anthropology and law. Exciting futures are always against and beyond the disciplines. If academics are not able to take responsibility for their disciplines then, as has become clear, no one else will.

At the time, I guess, we thought being critical of our disciplines was clever. Little did we know that academic expert committees, funders, governments and University managers would soon give even the most radical academics lessons in being critical and in academic openness.

Today it is education ministers and University administrators who lecture critical academics about the dangers of our narrow reductionism, our elitist claims of knowledge for its own sake, our exclusionary hierarchies and practices, our hubristic universal and progressive claims for our sciences, and our lack of plurality and openness. I wonder where they got their ideas from? I wonder why the war on the disciplines seems to be so popular with those in authority? I wonder if perhaps we need to reconsider the radical nature of the demand for 'openness' in the social sciences and humanities?