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Social Science for Public Knowledge

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Public engagement was a strong feature of the social sciences from their birth. Could one imagine Hobbes, Locke or the Scottish moralists as mere academics? Weber, Durkheim, and the great Chicago School sociologists had university jobs but both public concerns and public audiences. Social scientists today contribute to public understanding of issues from social inequality to transformations of the family. They also inform public policy on problems from educational reform to economic productivity. But since World War II, dramatic growth in universities and research institutions not only created opportunities for social scientists, it contained much of their communication inside the academy. An ideology that opposed academic professionalism to public engagement and a prestige hierarchy that favored allegedly pure science over applied added to the tendency.¹

Today there are widespread calls for more public social science. Academics have recognized the problems that come from being too much cut off from public discussion. But two questions arise. First, what is the relationship between effective participation in public discourse and the maintenance of more or less autonomous academic fields with their own standards of judgment and intellectual agendas? Second, what is the relationship between “public intellectual” work, informing broad discussions among citizens, and “policy intellectual” work informing business or government decision makers.

The Heart of the Matter

Public social science depends on addressing public issues and informing public understanding. Simply reaching a broader public is only part of the story. Certainly a social science turned in on itself fails to achieve much public significance. But more important than the desire to promulgate what social scientists know is the effort to bring knowledge to bear on pressing public issues.

Problem choice is fundamental.

¹ In the United States and most of Europe this ideology and prestige hierarchy spread during the postwar era, were disrupted by the 1960s and then resumed, sometimes with a vengeance, in the 1970s and 80s. See Craig Calhoun and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, “Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Hierarchy: ‘Mainstream’ Sociology and its Challengers” in *Sociology in America: A History*, edited by Craig Calhoun. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. This pattern was less pronounced elsewhere, especially in countries where academic employment seldom provided researchers with adequate incomes, and holding multiple jobs and writing for pay – as well as different academic and political traditions -- encouraged engagement in the public sphere.

What scientists work on and how they formulate their questions shape the likelihood that they will make significant public—or scientific—contributions. Of course there are and must be research projects driven by intellectual curiosity and by attempts to solve theoretical problems—and these produce may produce useful, even necessary knowledge for a range of public projects. But it is also true that many academic projects are driven by neither deep intellectual curiosity nor pressing public agendas, but simply by the internal arguments of academic subfields or theoretically aimless attempts at cumulative knowledge that mostly accumulate lines on CVs. To justify these by an ideology of pure science is disingenuous. To let these displace the attention of researchers from major public issues is to act with contempt towards the public that pays the bills. Making the sorts of social science we already produce more accessible is not sufficient; we have to produce better social science. This means more work addressing public issues—and being tested and pushed forward by how well it handles them—and high standards for the originality and importance of projects not tied directly to public issues.

Some social science should be directly responsive to public issues as they are already subjects of public debate or policy-making. To be effective, this must be something close to “real time social science”. That is, it must bring knowledge into public discussion very quickly; it must accommodate the schedules of policy-making not the ideal working conditions of scholarship. This usually means deploying in new contexts knowledge that academics have already developed, or quickly preparing new analyses of existing data. When the UN takes on a peace-keeping mission, for example, academic social scientists can bring important knowledge of local conditions and conflicts to policy-makers or the military. When legislatures consider issues like reform of welfare institutions academic expertise can clarify how existing systems and experiments have actually worked. This sort of real time social science depends on longer-term research projects already underway and on the development of social science expertise through careers of scholars who learn about issues even when they are not immediately the focus of public attention.

But real time social science can also mean gathering new information and developing new knowledge in the context of rapidly changing social circumstances. When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, for example, it was important for researchers to turn their attention immediately to studying processes of response, adaptation, displacement, resettlement, and reconstruction. If research wasn’t launched quickly crucial data would be lost. But at the same time, this research was inevitably part of the process of response to the event and researchers had an opportunity – and perhaps an obligation -- to inform public discussions even while they were working to improve knowledge.

Most academic research cannot be and should not be “real time” in these senses. Part of the special conditions research institutions provide for creating better knowledge is the capacity to work on issues over extended periods of time. But this doesn’t mean that there is no important relationship to public affairs. Researchers may choose the problems on which they will focus by paying attention to the world around them and deciding on issues that seem important. Issues like social inequality, international migration, transformations of marriage and family, ethnic conflict, or the economic implications of

aging populations are all, for better or worse, relatively long term concerns. They may be studied in more immediate ways related to current policy dilemmas or in terms of larger and longer lasting patterns. Social science produces public knowledge when it provides historical or comparative context to grasping particular configurations of such issues as well as when it evaluates the results of particular policies.

Addressing public issues does not mean merely bringing social science to already clearly formulated problems. It means analyzing why problems are posed in particular ways and what the implications are. It means asking whether certain ways of stating the issues make it harder to find resolutions. It means locating blind spots and questioning whether taken-for-granted appearances are as real or transparent as they seem. This is one of the ways in which situating contemporary issues and proposed solutions in comparative and historical contexts is vital. Although critical theory has also been allowed to become a heavily academic field, the tasks of critique are not of merely academic significance but rather of considerable public import.

More generally, the development of better theory or intellectual synthesis, better knowledge of the range of intellectual tools and perspectives developed by earlier social scientists, and better methods of research and analysis are all important. They strengthen the whole social science enterprise so that it can perform better in all ways, including when deployed to advance understanding of pressing public issues. The point is not that all social science should be harnessed to the immediate task of addressing public debates or public policy. Some division of labor is appropriate along with a diversity of tasks. But it is a crucial point that social science demonstrates its usefulness by informing public knowledge, not simply accumulating esoteric knowledge inside disciplines. The value and reward systems of social science accordingly need to encourage attention to improving understanding of the world around us. This means choosing intellectual problems for research at least partly on that basis, and encouraging structures of interaction among scientists that bring their different expertise to bear on those problems -- rather than always separating specialists into competitive subfields.

Public social science does not equal applied social science.

More “applied” research may be helpful, but the opposition of applied to pure is itself part of the problem. It distracts attention from the fundamental issues of quality and originality and misguides as to how both usefulness and scientific advances are achieved. Sometimes work undertaken mainly out of intellectual curiosity or to solve a theoretical problem may prove practically useful. At least as often, research taking up a practical problem or public issue tests the adequacy of scientific knowledge, challenges commonplace generalizations, and pushes forward the creation of new, fundamental knowledge. Moreover, work engaging important public issues—democracy and the media, AIDS and other infectious diseases, immigration and ethnicity—is not necessarily short-term or limited to informing immediate policy-decisions. While putting social science to work in “real time” practice is vital, it is also crucial to recognize that none of these issues will go away soon. We won’t learn how to deal with them better in coming

decades if we don't commit ourselves now to both long-term pursuit of deeper knowledge and also systematic efforts to assess and learn from the practical interventions made in the meantime.

This emphasis on practical problems need not come at the expense of basic social science knowledge. As Donald Stokes emphasized with regard to the biological sciences, tackling practical questions can be a stimulus to advance theoretical knowledge. His example was Louis Pasteur, whose pioneering research was usually occasioned by an effort to solve an everyday challenge -- like brewing beer -- but which also changed the course of biology.² Stokes notes that many advances in basic science have been stimulated -- even made possible -- by efforts to solve practical problems. "Pasteurization" was not simply an application of previously acquired knowledge, but the result of a process that inextricably intertwined knowledge formation, practical problem-solving, and the effort to actually make something work. Advances in social science are at least as much driven by work in "Pasteur's Quadrant".

It should be clear that this does not mean that there is no difference between basic and more epiphenomenal knowledge. There are at least three senses in which some knowledge is more basic: (1) it provides a basis for discovering or developing new knowledge, like a good theory, a useful research technique, or an exemplary research study that guides by analogy; (2) it articulates a pattern in social life, a causal relationship, or an explanatory mechanism that is useful in grasping otherwise different phenomena; or (3) it is of widespread significance -- usually because it describes a more or less generalizable phenomenon. But none of these senses of "basic" knowledge requires us to see the tackling of practical questions as mere "application" though it is certainly true that there is also knowledge of how particular cases exemplify broader patterns and it is important that much research address such particulars without being required to generate new generalizations.

Public social science is not simply the "application" of previously accumulated knowledge. It is part of the process of forming, testing, and improving knowledge. This is obscured by the dichotomy of pure vs applied, especially as recast in the post-WWII context. The distinction became part of the sales pitch for the value of basic science that had no immediate payoff: sooner or later, science advocates suggested, such "blue sky" research would eventually yield truths that could be applied in more practical efforts.³ This was sometimes true -- as famously space research yielded the capacity to make non-stick cooking surfaces -- but also misleading. It implies a temporal and intellectual order of discovery-then-application that is often not how knowledge develops in the real world.

² Stokes, *Pasteur's Quadrant* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997).

³ In the US, presidential science adviser Vannevar Bush played a crucial role in making this sort of case for government funding of basic science. In varying degrees similar arguments have been prominent elsewhere. They have brought gains in support for longer-term research agendas driven by intellectual curiosity. Governments seeking only knowledge immediately useful for already government-defined agendas would have supported science much less. But the structure of the opposition embedded the notion of deeper importance and longer range agendas in a cluster of problematic distinctions -- of the general from the particular, the abstractly formulated from the problem-focused, the pure from the practical, and the scientifically expert from the publicly engaged.

This may be especially true for the social sciences, where knowledge especially embedded in culture and in dialog between researchers and the rest of society. But even in the apparently more “objective” natural sciences it is true. And thinking otherwise encourages a hierarchical structure of scientific knowledge in which allegedly “pure” research is seen as more “basic” than “applied research”. This sort of hierarchy is especially pernicious for activist research.

The commonplace notion of application is also misleading because it relies on an understanding of scientific knowledge as the accumulation of established truths. Not only are “pure” scientists held to work most completely in the realm of these truths (no matter where their funding comes from). The truths are held to be certain, settled, and independent of context or formulation. Especially since Thomas Kuhn’s classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, however, this presumption has been widely treated with skepticism or rejected. Even those who disagree with particulars of Kuhn’s argument mostly recognize the importance of his central point: that “truths” are formulated and stabilized within scientific paradigms that allow for the “normal science” of effective testing of propositions and elaboration of theories, but that revolutionary breakthroughs in science often derive from growing recognition of contradictions and aporias within these paradigms, which in turn they shatter and replace.⁴ This is not an argument against truth or for an anything goes relativism. But it is an argument for seeing science as a historical process, always open-ended in ways large as well as small. And this in turn is an argument for a more democratic vision of science, one in which possession of current “truths” is less of a trump card for certified experts to play in relation to lay people.

Social scientists engaging public questions need to offer truth. If scholarly knowledge has no authority, if it doesn’t provide good reasons to believe that some courses of action are better than others, or riskier, or less reliable then it doesn’t have a distinctive value. But the authority of scholarly knowledge isn’t and can’t be perfect. Science is, after all, in large part a process of learning from errors, not just a process of accumulating truths. And especially in social science, truths are often highly contextual and conditional, predictions of what is more or less likely under certain circumstances, not statements of absolute and unvarying causal relationships. Social scientists bring real knowledge, but inevitably incomplete knowledge. The truths of social science are, moreover, graspable in different ways. They have to be communicated and this always means rendering them in ways the foreground certain aspects more than others, that illuminate some dimensions and leave others in the shadows. Knowledge is part of culture, not easily and fully abstractable from the rest of culture. But it is partly through the effort to communicate knowledge to non-specialists that researchers (like teachers) see new implications of what they know, new dimensions to issues they thought they understood fully, and sometimes limits to their own grasp of what they thought were established truths.

⁴ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962; rev. ed. 1970). Kuhn, of course, did not think the social sciences achieved paradigms in his strong sense and therefore had revolutions. To the extent that this is true, it is all the more reason not to think solely in terms of normal science models of accumulating knowledge.

Moreover, social scientists are not the only people with serious social knowledge, though they may be the only ones in the business of trying to formulate it as scientific propositions or write it up in books. Housing activists, for example, often know more about housing issues than academic researchers. The kind of expertise that academics offer will seldom be simply accumulated facts, and especially not about the domains in which activists work. But researchers may be able to analyze data in ways that reveal previous unseen or at least inadequately demonstrated patterns in the facts. They may be able to clarify understanding of some of the broader contexts that influence the specific domains in which activists work. They may be able to help activists reflect on their own movements and struggles, partly through knowledge of how other struggles have played out. They may bring knowledge of tactics to expand the repertoires of activists. And they, the social scientists, are likely to learn a great deal from their public collaborations and discussions.

Engagement with public constituencies must move beyond a dissemination model.

It is not enough to say that first scientists will do whatever “pure” research moves them and then, eventually, there will be a process of dissemination, application, and implementation. Too often, we act as though making sure that knowledge is shared and even used can be left to afterthoughts—separate actions after the research of which publication is the most important. And publication, we imply, is simply a matter of the eternal record, the accumulation of truths on which policy makers may eventually draw. But publication is also a basis for conversation, central to science not just as a record but as part of the process by which understanding is refined, errors corrected, and possible applications discerned.

We also need to bring non-scientific constituencies for scientific knowledge into the conversation earlier -- indeed often while research is still in the planning stage. Depending on the nature of the project, these might include policy makers, journalists, advocates, activists, or others. Getting a broader constituency involved in thinking about scientific research agendas as they are developed is an important way to make sure the results of scientific research get into the hands of those who need them. Neither broader dissemination nor better “translation” of social science will be adequate without a range of relationships to other constituencies that build an interest in and readiness to use the products of research.

For any cluster of research problems there are potential constituents. These include practitioners in relevant professions. Studies of group deliberations are relevant to lawyers picking and addressing juries and studies of organizational structure and performance are relevant to business leaders. But constituents also include activists and advocates and policy-makers, as studies of the implications of media ownership or patterns in content matter to those who would shape media policy. And constituents also include broader publics of those interested in particular issues from gender, to AIDS, to new technologies or potential economic crises. Academics themselves, across their disciplines, are part of the constituency for specialized research on the state of higher

education (or they ought to be). In any and all of these cases, early and continued interaction with constituents for social science research offers a range of advantages. It generates interest in social science research. It also suggests questions to social scientists – both research questions they may not have formulated and questions they will have to deal with if their research is to be well-received or understood correctly by broader publics.

Sometimes there are specific arenas for this constituency contact. Professional associations sometimes mediate between academic social scientists and relevant professionals (though such relations are not always well-maintained). Social movements are important when they help link academic research to activists and both to broader publics – as the labor movement, the women’s movement, the peace movement, various contending environmental movements and religious movements have sometimes done. Interest groups link people with disabilities, autistic children, specific diseases, investments in specific industries, concern for the economic development of particular places, or common circumstances like aging. Social scientists doing related research benefit from communication with these constituents at all stages of their work. But of course how well they connect depends on mediating institutions not just good will. It requires some effort to build and sustain linkages.

Writing well for broader publics is obviously important, but it is in a sense a broadcast method for communication. In itself it doesn’t build a network of linkages or facilitate interaction. Historically, social scientists were often active in public speaking, which did allow for more interactive discussion. This was true at community levels, in contacts with reading groups, churches, and business associations. And it was prominent in national organizations like the Chautauqua movement in the United States. It is worth recalling that the leaders of Chautauqua in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were often social scientists – and that leading social scientists were frequent and popular speakers. Labor organizations often provided for similar linkages in Europe. Both Chautauqua and a range of Labor organizations remain active, but in general they are not comparably prominent in the organization of public discussion not comparably closely linked to social science.

What happened was largely the growth of the university sector. As academia grew, other academics became an ever more important audience for researchers. Of course teaching was also important, and it became perhaps the central way in which social scientists communicated their knowledge publicly. Teaching remains vitally important. But it is the introductory classes for nonspecialists that communicate to broader publics (as distinct from those preparing for more specialized careers). And these are only less valued by the academic hierarchy, they are closer to the dissemination model. For some professors, to be sure, classroom discussions spark new intellectual questions. But to a very large extent, even well-taught introductory classes are occasions for distributing the knowledge formed on the basis of research and standardized by disciplinary consensus. Ideally they at least motivate students’ interest in further learning of what social scientists have to offer. But as important as teaching of undergraduates is, it cannot really substitute for

interaction between academic social scientists and members of other professions or leaders in other lines of public engagement.

Electronic media do offer new levels of interactivity. To some extent, blogs revitalize the tradition of the feuilleton press. They offer a new economic model to the kind of communication once sustained by a variety of small magazines. This isn't the place to speculate on how electronic media may reshape the public sphere or academic participation in it. There is little doubt that they will do so. But this is not simply a matter of technological determination. Social scientists can to a considerable extent choose the ways they will participate.

And not least of all, writing more clearly is obviously important. It is hard not to wonder sometimes whether social scientists intentionally use difficult prose as a mechanism to ensure academic insularity. Whether there is or isn't such intention – perhaps unconscious – overly complex and often simply bad writing has this effect.

Better writing would improve communication among social scientists as well between social scientists and broader constituencies. But attempts to write social science for very broad audiences are probably not the whole answer. It is important that some social scientists do this, and that many more social scientists write for readership that extends beyond specialists even if it doesn't reach best seller lists. But we should be cautious about taking writing for very broad audiences as a primary model for public social science. This may be more the task of some than others, and finding ways to support a division of labor - and sensibly value different roles – is an important challenge.

There are other challenges. The rise of think tanks has created a buffer between academic social scientists and both broader publics and policy-makers. Think tank staffs include social scientists, though often in structures not oriented to the best scientific knowledge. Some are clearly partisan, and try to mobilize not the best knowledge but the knowledge that will best support a predetermined position. Others are more balanced, but few offer the potential for open pursuit of knowledge that university appointments do. Nonetheless, some do excellent work. They are particularly important as sources for synthesis of existing knowledge and its deployment in public debate. This is not all bad, but academic social scientists should be concerned about the implications of such a buffer between universities and important publics. The rise of think tanks may change the demand for academic social science. It certainly introduces a new factor in how academic social science will be interpreted by broader publics and policy-makers. At the very least, academic researchers ought to be investigating how this mediation works.

An important public role of science is to generate theory and evidence that can command the serious attention of those who approach practical questions with different values or agendas. The “research” that informs too many public debates is tailor-made to fit the needs of one or another line of practical argument. This problem is exacerbated by the extent to which such research is produced on a contract basis by firms that do not have a commitment to advancing scientific knowledge and to the necessity of open debate over findings and arguments this entails. These firms—whether organized on a for-profit or

not-for-profit basis—have grown largely because there was a demand for them from policy-makers and advocates. This demand was informed partly by a desire to escape the uncertainties that a true quest for knowledge entails—including the possibility that the results won't support the position one has taken in advance. But it was also shaped by academic social scientists distancing themselves from public debates and practical issues in the name of pure science, orienting their communications almost entirely to each other, and failing to work at least partly on schedules that brought out the results of their work in time to address active issues.

Still more important, at least for now, is the role of journalists. Understanding how journalists (and those running blogs and websites) draw on social science is extremely important for a thriving public social science. And raising the standards for journalistic use of social science might be a crucial goal. This would require an active effort on the part of social scientists to develop relations with journalists and mechanisms to enable journalists to more readily find the information and contacts they need. Of course, such a change would flourish more if journalists covering social issues learn to use social science (as journalists covering legal issues are expected to know the law and those covering health to rely on medical research). There are experiments in incorporating more social science knowledge – and knowledge of how to make use of social science – into journalism curricula (notably at Columbia University). But the field of journalism is changing rapidly and the directions of change are not altogether clear.

This isn't just a matter of mass readership. There are basic questions about the economic bases on which the work of social scientists is made available to other social scientists and to all sorts of constituencies. Costs of academic publications are escalating rapidly. Costs for journals are outpacing those for books, and if for-profit publishers should shoulder some responsibility, even professional societies act like for-profit publishers in managing the journals they own. Surprisingly many seem to have maximizing income as their primary purpose – rather than, for example, trying to ensure the maximum access to social scientific knowledge. Libraries are reducing what they routinely buy. University presses are struggling to sustain their publishing programs without subsidies – often increasingly sought from authors. Electronic publication is perhaps part of the solution. But there are a range of larger questions about how much work should be published, about which parts of it should be subsidized and by whom and for whom, and about how potential users can be guided in finding relevant work and judging its likely worth.

Ironically, the scholarly “publish or perish” system may well have worked against wider public knowledge of social science. It has resulted in an ever larger number of publications read by ever fewer people. This is a problem even for the public of social scientists; even within disciplines it is not clear that a strong mutual engagement with common core texts or issues is maintained. It's not just that knowledge is specialized, though specialization may be extreme. It is that there are too many publications, most with too limited a value added to demand attention. These may serve the careers of individual scientists but they create collective disutilities including weakness of common discussion and difficulty identifying what work is worthwhile. Emphasis on the publication of ostensible new results is ironic because many papers offer little that is

significantly new. But absent much greater investments in synthesis – including assessment of the relative merits of different arguments -- even good work usually will remain obscure. And synthesis and critical debates need to be valued.⁵

Universities Have a Public Mission

These issues in scholarly publishing are interwoven with transformations of universities. There is less serious social science research on universities as social institutions and less reflexive analysis of the institutions on which social science knowledge rests than one might expect. The changes in universities are important, though, for the ways in which social science does and does not become a support for public knowledge – as well as simply for whether social science prospers.

At the heart of the issue lie questions about the public mission of the research university. How these are answered shapes financing of course, but also the relationship of teaching to research, of mass education to elite institutions, of acquiring specialized knowledge to gaining capacity to join in the public discussion of citizens. Is admission to university simply a private, individually appropriated benefit – even when the university is publicly financed? Or is knowledge – and the capacity to acquire and use knowledge – a public good? What “public” means in such a discussion, why it matters, and how public benefits might be demonstrated are all important social science questions.

They are not simply abstract theoretical questions. Public universities are suffering serious fiscal pressures, and sometimes responding in ways that fundamentally transform their social roles. Since they draw in varying degree on state budgets, it is important to ask what public interests they serve. Are they merely mechanisms for the (more or less fair) distribution of state subsidies to “deserving” students (who turn out to be mainly middle class)? Or are the subsidies also intended to support industry by virtue of research and training? Or do they have a more identifiably *public* mission, perhaps one connected to the role of public discussion in democracy?⁶

The answer is fundamental to whether key social institutions that support the production of scientific knowledge—and the education of citizens to understand it--will remain vibrant. Whether those who make decisions about public expenditures will think public research universities worth the cost depends in part on how well we scientists build bridges to other constituencies and make sure that science engages problems of pressing public importance.

A more public social science depends not only on the institutions in which knowledge is produced, but those in which it potentially informs public opinion, debate, and decision-

⁵ In most of the social sciences, the writing of textbooks is a low-prestige professional activity. Yet ironically, these are among the few occasions for synthesis and representation of larger fields of knowledge.

⁶ See Craig Calhoun and Diana Rhoten, eds, *The Public Mission of the Research University* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming). Also Calhoun, (2005) “The University and the Public Good,” *Thesis Eleven*, 84, pp. 7-43.

making. Democracy also depends on a vital public sphere, yet current transformations in the media—not just technology, but ownership and economic structure, content and orientation, career structure and professional practice—raise important questions. These should be topics for social science research. Advocates and activists tackle these questions, but with too little serious research informing their work and providing for learning from real-time engagements.

None of this means that the scientific research process should be short-circuited, that political or policy considerations should distort findings. Nor does it mean that social science isn't advanced by many kinds of work—such as much of the history and theory close to my own heart—that doesn't have immediate practical uses. It does mean that better relationships between scientists and broader constituencies are vital to making science more useful, and indeed, in many cases intellectually better. Indeed, it may even be the case that better shared discussion of research agendas will sometimes build the basis for more acceptance of unpopular findings.

Of course social scientists have long believed that the public *ought* to pay more attention to their work. The issue now is not simply to promote ourselves better, but to ask better social science questions about what encourages scientific innovation, what makes knowledge useful, and how to pursue both these agendas, with attention to both immediate needs and long term capacities. We need both positive science and critique, both expertise and engagement, and ways to create appropriate intellectual authority without cutting off public engagement by exaggerated or misplaced claims for certainty.

Back to Our Roots

Calls for a more public orientation to social science seek to reclaim an important dimension of the history of social science. While universities have roots in ancient philosophy and medieval monastic communities, the roots of the modern social sciences were laid outside academia or in new and reformed universities. John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, David Ricardo, Adolphe Quetelet, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer and Lester Frank Ward all made their contributions without university posts. The Scottish universities were more open than the English in the 18th and 19th centuries. And after the Humboltian reforms so were many of the German. In the United States too the social sciences began to gain academic footholds earlier in new universities like Johns Hopkins and especially Chicago than in older ones where classical curricula dominated through the late 19th century.

Indeed, the social sciences came to the fore as part of a rebellion against exclusive study of the old disciplines. They grew along with science and technology because they were deemed forward-looking and important to 'progress', relevant to solving contemporary problems and furthering positive innovations. They grew along with broader enrolments as universities became less narrowly elite, expanding beyond the education of gentlemen and clergymen to training a range of professionals and members of the middle classes. The capacity of the social sciences to inform public discourse was vital to their growth.

But social scientists also sought scholarly legitimacy and sometimes experienced public engagement as a liability when they clashed with their employers. Edward A. Ross and Richard T. Ely were both fired by Stanford in the 1890s for their pro-labor sympathies (and their colleague Thorstein Veblen was forced to resign about the same time, though for womanizing and bad lecturing as well as critical politics).⁷ World War I brought a sharp reaction against pacifist academics – disproportionately social scientists – and socialism. Casualties included such prominent figures as W. I. Thomas, pushed out of the University of Chicago (though with dubious morals charges a pretext). Economics and sociology were much more activist in that period than political science, still closely allied with history and a more conservative vision of the role of the state. The issues in any case were not unique to the time or the place. Social scientists pursuing important public issues of their day have more than once found universities less than accommodating.

But public engagement raised another problem. Social scientists who reached broader publics and addressed contemporary issues potentially suffered unfavorable comparisons in relation to other fields within academia. A focus on public communication suggested a limited professional autonomy and direct subject to popular rather than expert judgment. This remains an issue for more publicly oriented social science: the distinctive contribution of social scientists depends on partial autonomy from public opinion. This is crucial not only to the pursuit of possibly unpopular problems but to the scholarly judgment of the quality of evidence and arguments.

The social sciences cannot dispense with the effort to produce authoritative knowledge; this is crucial to the distinctive contributions they can make to public affairs. But questions need to be raised about how such authoritative knowledge should be understood and achieved.

Positioned between the humanities (which incorporated many of the older disciplines as well as some newer ones) and the natural and physical sciences (which were the most dramatic innovations of the reformed and new universities) they had two models. The late 19th century *methodenstreit* reflected this opposition in its distinction of particularizing from generalizing approaches to knowledge. But in each case, the claim to a particular kind of knowledge was rendered abstractly, rooted in “mainstream” epistemology. That is, it sought closure on definite answers anchored in the singular positions of individual knowers and abstracted from ongoing processes of social change. Social scientists do

⁷ The firings were pivotal events in the history of academic freedom and the development of the institution of tenure. George Elliott Howard, another prominent economics professor (and later President of the precursor to the American Sociological Association), was fired for protesting the dismissal of Ross. See Thomas L. Haskell, “Justifying the Rights of Academic Freedom in the Era of ‘Power/Knowledge,’” pp. 43-90 in Louis Menand, ed.: *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Several other faculty members resigned in protest. If the Stanford firings were the most egregious, Chicago also repeatedly disciplined faculty who became too radical-- firing or forcing resignations from some. The new universities created by “robber baron” fortunes created opportunities for social science to flourish, but also disciplined the new disciplines. Chicago was built largely with Standard Oil money; Stanford’s wealth was based on the Union Pacific Railroad (hence the sensitivity on Chinese labor questions – the issue Ross had taken up).

arrive at strong claims to empirical knowledge of both more specific and more general phenomena. It is meaningful and appropriate to speak of truth and thus of bringing knowledge not merely opinion into the public sphere. But it is misleading to imagine this truth as final, singular, and abstracted from processes of change. And this is specifically limiting for a vision of more public social science.

A first step in making a more public social science is to recognize the importance of public communication and argument internal to the scientific community. This is not only a spur to the advancement of knowledge, it is integral to thinking about knowledge. For knowledge is not simply an achievement of singular knowers rather than of the interaction among many. This is not the place for sustained discussion of epistemology, but we may note the important challenges to some conventional notions that are offered variously by approaching knowledge through the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, by the rhetorical tradition, and by pragmatism. These are distinct but overlapping.

Arguments rooted in the notion of *phronesis* emphasize the kinds of knowledge that inform action and judgment internally rather than externally. Our knowledge of moral virtue or the agendas of other social actors, thus, is different from our knowledge of geology or elementary mechanics which may be approached externally (for Aristotle, under the heading *Sophia*). Not only does *phronesis* depend on a different sort of judgment, that judgment is always embedded in history and change and as a result never completable. Bent Flyvberg has drawn some of the implications of this for a more public social science by suggesting that social scientists focus on core questions that embed knowledge in change, action, and moral judgment: (1) Where are we going? (2) Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power? (3) Is this development desirable? (4) What should we do about it?⁸

The rhetorical tradition has been a sort of subordinated “other” to the dominant traditions in modern philosophy (indeed, since the ancient quarrels of philosophers and orators). Its significance lies not in the technical analysis of rhetoric elaborated in the ancient world or middle ages, but in the importance of locating knowledge in argument. This again stresses the plurality of perspectives – and indeed the importance of perspective itself. It also locates knowledge in particular settings, making clear its limits and it emphasizes the extent to which knowledge is embedded in efforts to work out particular problems.⁹

Pragmatism approaches knowledge in terms of the methods for knowing, and thus again in terms of action. But if Cartesian methodology and much of consequent epistemology is rooted in ahistorical individual knowers, pragmatism emphasizes the social and temporal character of knowledge. This can be no more than approximation to an ideal of what the best-informed researchers would know with infinite time, capacity to ascertain the

⁸ Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁹ There is no single work laying out the general relevance of rhetoric for social science (a further sign of the subordinated place of rhetoric in modern thought). See for an example of rhetorically informed analysis of a key public issue as a problem for social science Peter A. Meyers, *Civic War and The Corruption of the Citizen: Democracy in America After 9/11*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

relevant facts, and opportunities to inform each other through critical debate. This limit is not trivial under any circumstances but is particularly important if we are considering the contributions of social science to pressing public problems. The knowledge produced by social science is of great value, but is always partial, plural, and revisable. As Charles Sanders Peirce suggested, even under more ideal circumstances than we usually have, truth needs to appear with some humility in recognition of this.¹⁰

As social science knowledge is introduced into the broader public sphere, it is important still to recognize the plurality of perspectives and potential incompleteness characteristic of the internal public sphere of science itself.

In much of social science – and not only social science -- there is a fetishization of “new knowledge”. This has two pernicious dimensions. First and foremost, it values trivial additions of new ostensibly general findings over important specifications of relationships at work in particular cases that can guide practical action and public discussion. Second, it values findings over interpretations, deepening of theoretical understanding, or making connections within extant knowledge. This means that the necessary public debate among scientists about the significance of research findings is given short shrift. It also means that efforts simultaneously to understand and to communicate the implications of research-based knowledge are rewarded less than sheer accumulation. Both dimensions are underpinned by a not very explicit (or intelligent) epistemology that suggests that the accumulation of knowledge is like the accumulation gravel in a pile, and that every small fragment of stone is a meaningful addition. This underestimates the extent to which findings become usable knowledge only by integration into larger structures of understanding.

It is not that new knowledge generated by research is unimportant. On the contrary, it is vital. But it is incomplete without those larger structures of understanding. Empirical findings only become evidence (in the sense of, e.g., evidence-based medicine or any other sort of professional practice) when they are integrated into arguments – such as causal explanations, though these are not the only scientifically meaningful structures of understanding. This is at once what makes possible the development of theory and really cumulative knowledge in the social sciences, and what makes possible the mediation of more or less general knowledge with particular cases in professional practice and public discussion.

These considerations suggest humility and embedding knowledge in dialog not dicta. But they do not suggest abandoning the idea that some claims to knowledge are more authoritative than others. Social science really does offer useful knowledge, and the knowledge is useful because it has what philosophers call “truth value”. The truths may be partial, or qualified, or statable in different ways in different languages with somewhat

¹⁰ As Peirce put it, “Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief, which concordance the abstract statement may possess by virtue of the confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness, and this confession is an essential ingredient of truth.” “Truth and Falsity and Error,” *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1931–1935, p. 565.

different connections and implications. But truth value means that certain statements get things right more than others. They offer more accurate or better understanding of what is going on in the world.

But here a distinction needs to be made between science and the scientist. None of us has complete command of all the “truths” of social science. We need to watch out for confusing the authority of scientifically verified knowledge – which is very important, even if limited – with the authority of scientists as individual people. It may make sense for others to respect social scientists for their PhDs and the breadth of their knowledge. But it wouldn’t make sense for this respect to turn into the belief that because a social scientist is smart, well-educated, and a member of a discipline with authoritative knowledge on some subjects that everything this social scientists says is true or deserving of more respect than what others have to say. For after all, on many subjects – including some of the subjects of her or his own discipline – the social scientist knows little if anything more than the average layperson and often less than those lay people who focus most on those subjects. Pierre Bourdieu, following Michel Foucault, expressed this point as the difference between “general” and “specific” intellectuals. General intellectuals use their prestige to claim the right to speak authoritatively on almost any subject, regardless of whether they have specialized, research-based knowledge of that subject. Specific intellectuals more modestly but also more rigorously claim the authority of research – and scholarly debate and testing of research findings – to speak on those subjects about which they have real expertise. But, suggested Bourdieu, the more general authority of science inheres in the collective work of many participants, not simply the personae of individuals.¹¹

In Conclusion

A recent newspaper review praised the author of a work of public social science for exemplifying a public intellectual. The definition offered for this term suggests some of what is at stake in orienting social science to public knowledge:

“Public intellectual... That is to say, the individual still bold enough to put his mind and his knowledge to use in analyzing the world around us, in language that most of us can understand, and with an eye toward effecting practical improvements”.¹²

The definition is useful. In particular, the idea of knowledge oriented towards the world around us, arising from an interest in that world, its processes and its problems, is basic to public social science. Communicating better is basic. And social science indeed has a great deal to offer to those public actors who would try to effect practical improvements.

But it is worth remembering that pursuing social science for public knowledge will also result in better social science. Just as social scientists need public discussion amongst themselves to test and challenge their propositions and explore the significance of their

¹¹ Bourdieu, “The Corporatism of the Universal: The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World,” *Telos* 81 (1989): 99-110.

¹² Kevin Baker in “Modernist Times,” review of N. Glazer, *From a Cause to a Style*” NYT Book Review, 3 June 2007, p. 57.

findings, so broader public engagements can be intellectually productive. These engagements also help social scientists resist the tendency to become too complacent, too affirmative of the existing order, and too focused on the internal projects of knowledge and hierarchies of scientific achievement as though these were entirely self-justifying. Public social science puts new issues on the research agenda as well as the public agenda. It encourages creativity and forces confrontation between different perspectives, explanations, and statements of fact. Such creativity and confrontation advance social science.