The Political Economy of Social Science: Where the Trail Leads

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended as a search to identify the conclusions about the social sciences which result from applying insights from political economy. Two major findings were their ties to governments and their membership in the knowledge industry, a group of multinationals whose existence gives a competitive edge to paradigms espoused by the rich and the developed. The postwar dominance of U.S. paradigms is thus traced to overall U.S. dominance and not to their intrinsic merits. Nor are these paradigms seen as international reference models which followed Kuhnian-type revolutions.

This is an exploratory essay whose purpose is to see where the logic of political economy leads the social sciences. This logic, of course, will be made to confront, and to seek, directions and guidance from, the historical/empirical record of these disciplines. What we are seeking are insights more so than any controlling "laws." The central issue to explore is the nature of postwar social science in the hands of the United States. This exploration will also produce insight into the nature of the general enterprise itself. This superpower's postwar position as the foremost social scientist has led some of its more avid partisans to believe that their discipline is maturing, i.e., it is becoming like the natural sciences and that the dominant American paradigm is becoming the international reference model for the mature discipline, This was the opinion of Almond, who when referring to his colleagues in American political science said: "We are maturing" (Almond, 1966). He then proceeded to spell out the American behavioral paradigm for political science as the international reference model for this discipline. Equally optimistic are those American scholars who believe that the time has come to write directories on how to do social science, "cookbooks" which contain the recipes which are touted as being the correct ones for a mature social science. Such an optimistic offering is that by Reynolds (1971). Partisans of this point of view have given up on exploring the history of social science or using any insights provided, for example, by political economy as a way of elucidating the disciplines.

If these scholars are correct, social science is taking an historic turn. It is maturing, taking on the characteristics of natural science. Its long trajectory

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from a simply study to a social science, to maturity is ending. A discipline becomes a social science, we are told, when it attains a certain degree of autonomy and, in addition, adopts what is extravagantly and inaccurately called the “scientific method”. This happened to economics perhaps with the physiocrats or somewhat later with Adam Smith—as with almost everything else in social science, there is little agreement on this point. In any case, our disciplines, according to the majority account, in this state are neither fish nor fowl—they are “social sciences”, suspended somewhere between science and non-science. But the positivist reckons their tilt in this suspended state as one in the direction of science. The Almonds and the “recipe writers” referred to above believe that maturity is at hand and that the Millian dream is near realization. In 1843, John Stuart Mill in his *A System of Logic* argued that the backward state of the moral sciences (read psychology) could be corrected only by application of the methods of physical science. In its case, truth claims are produced by consensus, by the “unanimous agreement of all who have attended to the proof.” We note that consensus is the trait emphasized here for science, and we extend Mill’s coverage to other social sciences as well. The good news, we are told, is that with social science in the hands of the Americans, the big step is being taken, and the realization of Mill’s dream is on the horizon.

Our work here is to use political economy in order to forge an alternate explanation. In doing so we also provide insights into the nature of our disciplines. The trail which we propose is the following. We first identify the traits of natural science, so that we have a standard against which to judge the maturity of the social sciences. Its outstanding general trait is its insulation from outside factors; thus natural science lends itself to internal interpretations. We next expose the economic side of our disciplines, so that their appropriateness for economic analysis becomes evident. This is done by tying them to the knowledge industry, and their link here is most obvious through education. The same activity ties them to government, which is so deeply involved in education, even in those societies with market economies. The double connection puts the social sciences in place for analysis by political economy, and this lends itself to an external interpretation of our disciplines. But political economy can lead to an internal interpretation as well. The general distinction between the two interpretations is that the external one sees society, culture, and the dominant elites, as having a great impact upon our disciplines, while the internal versions see the disciplines as more autonomous, like natural science, more in the hands of the practitioners and their own social science organizations. It is not merely the relative strengths of these factions which is at issue, but also the content of the disciplines and the nature of their communications system. These are the two factors which we test below. Internal explanations see society/culture/elites as catalysts which can stimulate the growth of a discipline, but its contents are immune from the grasp of these elements. The parallel is with natural science. The United States government can encourage the development of physics, but American culture or policy does not as a result become part of the laws of this discipline. Nor is there a