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Introduction

Contextualizing social science

Anna Larsson & Per Wisselgren

Social science is a bit like oxygen for modern democratic societies. It is of vital importance for any democracy that there is a free, dynamic, and critical discussion based on rational arguments, and hence also systematic, secular, and empirically validated knowledge about the basic features of the society we live in. Without access to empirical social knowledge about general patterns and current inequalities, it is very hard, not to say impossible, to convincingly argue for a change or an improvement of the prevalent social order in a democratic way. But social facts and critical social theories are not the only necessary components to keep a modern democracy going. We need more than oxygen to breath and stay alive. Equal structures, accurate voting systems, and publicly approved systems of governance, for instance, are in no way less important. And by the same token, social science is not good or bad in itself. Social scientific knowledge—like scientific knowledge in general—can be used or misused in any number of ways. Like pure oxygen, it all comes down to how it is handled and mixed with other vital elements if it is to fuel a warming fire or to cause a disaster.

Another observation, which goes in line with the ‘oxygenic’ character of the social sciences, is, as UNESCO’s latest *World Social Science Report* (2010: 285) formulates it, that they ‘are present everywhere but visible nowhere’. The important point being made in this seemingly paradoxical statement is that the social sciences are now integrated so fundamentally in the everyday structures of our modern society—in policy-making, in the media, in societal debates, in education, and in the cultural arena—that they are often taken for granted. It is only when they are absent, or when they are not working properly, that we recognize that something very important is missing.

Just imagine what a world would look like without the knowledge

produced by economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and statisticians at universities, research institutes, and think-tanks, by governments and in the media. Consider the masses of information that we have become used to consuming in our everyday lives, in the form of public opinion polls, economic analyses, psychological tests, and life-style advice, crime figures, census data, evaluations, political analyses of elections and of national security conditions, educational test results, and so on (see Cassidy 2008: 226; Camic et al. 2011: 1–3). Maybe it is exactly because the social sciences have been so successful in establishing themselves as academic disciplines and promoting their importance, usefulness, and relevance in most spheres of modern society, that they have acquired their paradoxical oxygenic character?

A knowledge gap to be filled

Despite their fundamental societal role, the social sciences have been surprisingly little studied in comparison with, for example, the natural, technical, and medical sciences. Whereas the historical and social study of the latter groups of sciences have been the object of a whole field of research—science and technology studies (STS), which has expanded rapidly since the 1960s—the social sciences have been relatively neglected within this field until recently. An important argument for learning about the so-called ‘hard’ sciences, and studying them in social context, has been that they affect the way we understand the world and the ways we lead our lives—just think about Copernicus’ and Darwin’s ‘revolutions’, medical progresses, or the social impact of information technology. Our main argument in this book is that the social sciences in similar ways have formed and reformed our self-understanding as social beings, and in important respects structured—and continue to structure—modern life, and therefore need to be critically and contextually scrutinized in the same way as the hard sciences (see Wallerstein et al. 1996; UNESCO 1999; Giddens 1991).

This book explores the role of the social sciences in different contexts. It does so by analysing the practical making of social-scientific knowledge along with its discursive aspects, not only in its academic forms—in psychology, business and administration studies, social gerontology, gender studies, educational science, geography, and political science—but also less institutionalized fields of social knowledge-making. Consequently, our conception of ‘social science’ is a broad and

inclusive one. The reasons are historical and methodological. If we are to understand the complex formation of ‘social science’ as we know it today, it is important not to anachronistically exclude those extra-academic actors, institutions, and knowledge practices which in their day were regarded as ‘social-scientific’ and contributed to this process, although some of them most probably would be disqualified as such according to the more narrow standards of our own time (see Porter & Ross 2003: 1–10; Camic et al. 2011: 3–4).

The anthology comprises fifteen essays written by an international and multidisciplinary group of scholars at different stages of their careers. The general aim of the book is to encourage a contextual and reflexive understanding of the changing roles and functions of the social sciences of the past and in today’s globalized world. Themes and issues that run across the essays include the institutionalization of the social sciences; the uses and functions of social knowledge, and its relations to publics and politics; inclusion and exclusion in terms of gender and power; disciplinary boundaries and interdisciplinarity; research funding; internationalization, global imbalances, and post-colonial perspectives.

Applying a contextual perspective in the study of the social sciences could be done in a variety of ways, as will be evident from the essays in this book. One basic aspect, however, is to emphasize the situated and contingent character of today’s knowledge configurations as the result of complex processes of change, and hence to apply a historical perspective. From our point of view, the historical approach is essential, as it is of vital importance to understand that the presence of the social sciences has not always been as incontestable and self-evident as it is today. Even if the history of social thought can be traced back to classical antiquity, and early ideas about the possibility of the science of society were already being aired during the Enlightenment, it was not until the later nineteenth century that the social sciences became established as academic disciplines. Since then, however, social science departments have been founded all over the modern world—in a first wave during the decades around the turn of the twentieth century and in a second wave after the Second World War—with a rapidity and on a scale that has few scientific counterparts in modern times (Wagner 1999, 2001; Porter & Ross 2003).

The study of the emergence of the social sciences and their successful integration with modern society should not therefore be consid-

ered an isolated or peripheral phenomenon, but, on the contrary, as a central and fundamental pillar in the formation of modernity. It has even been suggested that the twentieth century could be described as ‘the century of the social sciences’ (Wagner 1999). At the same time, a historical perspective helps us to analytically distance ourselves from the self-evident, and to understand the processes that have shaped the social sciences and their place in our current world. Still, though, most studies of the history of the social sciences have been written from an insider’s perspective with a focus on the prehistories of single disciplines, and often been restricted to a Eurocentric perspective. With this book, we seek to cast our net wider by studying social science not only in historical terms, but also in broader social and global contexts.

Three intersecting research areas

In relation to existing research, this book is situated at the intersection of three different fields of research—the history of science; science and technology studies; and global studies—each of which in recent decades has witnessed a slow, but steadily growing interest with regard to the social sciences. However, until now, these subfields concerned with the historical, sociological, and global aspects of social science have developed in relative isolation from one another.

In the history of science, for example, a field where its flagship journal *Isis* celebrated its centenary in 2013, the bulk of studies have by tradition focused on the natural, technological, and medical sciences, whereas empirical studies of the social sciences have remained notably few and far between. One of the many reasons for this is probably related to the Anglo-Saxon dominance of the field, where the linguistic denotation of ‘science’ (unlike its German and Scandinavian counterparts) has often restricted the objects of research to the natural and medical sciences (Porter & Ross 2003: 3–4; Wisselgren 2009: 5–6). For similar reasons, it is probably no coincidence that psychology, especially in its clinical and experimental forms, was among the first of the social science disciplines to attract attention from the historians of science in specialized journals such as the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* (est. 1964) and the *History of the Human Sciences* (est. 1988). Since the 1990s, however, the history of social science subfield has expanded with a steadily growing number of anthologies and general textbooks (see Fox et al. 1995; Smith 1997), where especially the inclu-

sion of Theodore Porter & Dorothy Ross's volume on the history of the modern social sciences (2003) in *The Cambridge history of science* series was an important landmark in the consolidation of the subfield. The last decade has consequently seen a growing proportion of articles on the social sciences in *Isis*; special issues of other prestigious journals, and a rapidly growing number of anthologies and monographs (for example, centred on cold-war social science in the US, we have Cohen-Cole 2009; Selcer 2009; Isaac 2011; Haney 2008; Backhouse & Fontaine 2010; Solovey & Cravens 2012; Igo 2007; Solovey 2012; and Isaac 2012).

The interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies, which emerged in part from the history of science (in the wake of Kuhn 1962) and to some extent can be seen as its younger sibling (although this relation in itself is a matter of some debate—see, for example, Daston 2009; Dear & Jasanoff 2010; Vandermoere & Vanderstraeten 2012), shares a traditionally passive interest in the social sciences (see Jasanoff et al. 1995; Hackett et al. 2008). An important early attempt at a more systematic STS-inspired approach to the study of the social sciences was made, however, in a series of volumes in the *Sociology of the Sciences* yearbooks in the 1990s (Wagner et al. 1991; Heilbron et al. 1996; Wittrock 2002). The occasional monograph, textbook, and conference with similar approaches have also been seen since then (for example, Wagner 2001; Andersen 2002; Wæver et al. 2011); however, when Camic et al. blurb their recent book *Social Knowledge in the Making* (2011) as 'the first comprehensive effort to study and understand the day-to-day activities involved in the creation of social-scientific and related forms of knowledge about the social world', we fully agree with their description of the area of social studies of social science as a great lacuna which still remains to be more systematically explored.

Our book can also be read as one response to the call from Camic et al. for further studies in the area. Like their volume, ours is concerned with the practical making of social-scientific knowledge and its central role in today's modern societies. Another similarity is that we too employ a historical and multidisciplinary approach to these issues. There are, however, a couple of important differences that distinguish the profile of our book from *Social Knowledge in the Making*. Whereas the empirical cases drawn on in Camic et al. mainly are concerned with the North American scene, our volume both complements and expands the scope by offering case-studies from a non-US context as well as from an explicitly

global perspective. Another difference is that while *Social Knowledge in the Making*, as the title signals, is thematically focused on the practical making of social science, our volume employs a broader analytical frame that looks not only to the practical dimensions, but also to the discursive and more explicitly power-related aspects of social knowledge-making. But there is certainly no contradiction between the two approaches. Rather, our intention here is to take the basic argument of Camic et al. one step further and develop their perspective by explicitly including the discursive aspects and putting them in a more global context.

This brings us to the third field on which this book draws, namely the global and transnational studies of social science. As part of a growing awareness of the fallacies of methodological nationalism and the need to include global power relations in analyses of humankind's colonial past and postcolonial present, the last two decades have witnessed an ever growing number of studies of social science in global context. The late 1990s saw not only a few groundbreaking articles on the imperial context of social science, but also more systematic attempts at mapping social science in a world context in the shape of UNESCO's first *World Social Science Report* (Connell 1997; UNESCO 1999). Since then another *World Social Science Report* (2010) has appeared, as well as a more general recognition of the need to problematize the traditional, Western dominance in the social sciences (Connell 2007, 2011; Alatas 2006; Heilbrun et al. 2008; Keim 2008, 2011; Patel 2010; Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al. 2010; Beigel 2013).

By drawing on these three, until now, relatively separate research strands, this book offers a first attempt at combining historical, STS-inspired, and global studies of social sciences in a fruitful dialogue with one another, and thus hopefully will encourage further research in new directions.

Structure of the book

The book falls into three parts, each of which is thematically centred on one contextual aspect of the production of social science. This design reflects the argument about the importance of a widened perspective: in order to understand the societal role of the social sciences, and the dynamics and multifaceted aspects of the development of social science, it is necessary to explore different forms of social knowledge not only inside the academy and the disciplinary developments, but also in a broader historical, social, and global context.

Part I: Outside academia

The first part looks at the non-academic contexts, not only as arenas for the marketing and consumption of social knowledge, but also as places where social knowledge is enhanced, distorted, and produced. There is no simple causal relationship between academic social science and 'non-academic' audiences of social knowledge. Especially in times when academic social science was only vaguely institutionalized, social knowledge was not only used, but was also produced outside the academy, in state-governed forums, in newspapers, in social museums, in schools, and so on. Hence, to understand the successful expansion of social-scientific knowledge production during the twentieth century, it is necessary to broaden the perspective outside the universities.

In the first chapter, Eileen Janes Yeo argues that class and gender perspectives on the history of the production of social science knowledge will provide a more complex picture, and in so doing she focuses on two cases: class issues in early nineteenth-century British systematic social investigation, and gender considerations with respect to social scientist couples at the turn of the twentieth century. Through her discussion of these cases, Yeo problematizes the canonical construction of social science.

In Chapter 2, Per Wisselgren discusses the role of the public and its gendered aspects. Empirically, the case-study he uses is the very first public social science lectures at Stockholm University College in 1888. By analysing this seemingly peripheral event, he argues, it is necessary to situate the event historically in its broader social, cultural, and political context, and apply a more circular perspective to the distribution of agency, if we are to understand the full complexity of the co-production of early academic social science and its gendered publics during this formative phase.

In Chapter 3, Jonas Harvard considers how different media forms have co-created important trends in the development of the social sciences, analysing the use of newspaper enquêtes in early twentieth-century Sweden. He argues that the newspaper enquête can be seen as an example of the interplay between media forms, social knowledge, and the nature of public opinion. One of the outcomes of the discussion is that the quantitative–qualitative dichotomy, as it is often used today, needs to be problematized.

Chapter 4, by Frans Lundgren, focuses on so-called social museums at the turn of the twentieth century. These aimed to make social-scientific

issues accessible to the general public, and Lundgren analyses their politico-didactic function—how they taught people to understand themselves as social beings and citizens. In more general terms, the essay thus discusses the co-production of social knowledge, social order, and public discourse.

The first part ends with an essay by Anna Larsson on expertise in the application of behavioural science. She identifies Sweden's state schools as one important arena for the use of social knowledge, and exemplifies this by analysing school psychologists and their expert role in post-war schools. The essay illuminates a process where the social space for psychologists and their expertise was formed and reformed in schools in relation to the pertaining institutional and organizational demands, to social-scientific ideas and ideals, and to other professional groups in the school arena, as well as parents and pupils.

Part II: Disciplines and interdisciplinarity

Although extra-academic contexts were important as sites for social-scientific knowledge production, this does not, of course, mean that the internal developments in university disciplines should be ignored. The second part of the volume offers a range of case-studies that investigate the multifaceted character and diversity of academic disciplinary trajectories. But rather than looking at one discipline or a more restricted internal disciplinary history, the essays pay attention to a number of different disciplines, often in relation to a range of other fields and interpreted in a broader social context, and bringing to the fore questions about the intriguing relationship between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity.

Chapter 6 addresses German sociology under the Nazi regime. As Wiebke Keim argues, the case raises a number of basic questions about the definition and self-definition of disciplines; disciplinary continuity and change; the relation between context and content; and historiography and relativism. How far did the given historical, socio-cultural, economic, and legal contexts affect the work of sociologists? Can we speak of sociology as soon as the actors of the period themselves refer to themselves as sociologists? And what were the consequences of the 1933–45 period for German sociology, and for the discipline as a whole up to the present?

In Chapter 7, Andrew Arbuthnott focuses on the discipline of busi-

ness administration and discusses it in relation to other social science disciplines and by drawing on a wide range of examples, not only in the Nordic countries but from around the world. In the essay, this discussion is related to the widely recognized and much debated book *Open the Social Sciences* by the so-called Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, led by Immanuel Wallerstein.

Åsa Andersson takes another direction in Chapter 8 by pointing to the long prehistory of the concepts of activity and disengagement in discussions about ageing, as a backdrop to the emergence and controversies of the concept of 'successful ageing' in mid-twentieth-century social gerontology. She relates the debate over ageing to Hanna Arendt's thoughts on what it means to be a human being, and the reasons why activity theory came to dominate are discussed.

In Chapter 9, Katarina Kärnebro contextualizes and analyses the historical emergence of men's studies as a new academic field in Sweden from the 1980s onwards, with a focus on its relation to other orientations within gender studies and to educational studies. She discusses the impact of the Anglo-Saxon domination of gender studies on Swedish educational research, and reflects on present and possible future developments of the field.

In the final essay of this part of the volume, Erika Knobblock looks at the history of geography as a social science. She discusses the implications of globalization for research, giving examples drawn mainly from the subdiscipline of economic geography, and suggests that even though globalization implies a new scale, it remains the case that space and place are still concepts that generate central research problems and are vital for our understanding of economic activities and their location.

Part III: Global contexts

The third and final part widens the contextual approach again. Although the previous essays are not solely focused on cases in the Western world, the common denominator for all the essays in this section is that they all more systematically apply a global or transnational perspective.

In Chapter 11, Rickard Danell examines some current global trends and discusses the phenomenon of stratification in the scientific communication system, with special attention paid to how changes in

publishing systems and researchers' publication strategies intensify international dominance relationships in the social sciences. He traces changes in geographical diversity and geographic communicative segmentation, which indicate a communication regime where national and international intellectual interests coincide.

Henrik Chetan Aspengren discusses in Chapter 12 how social knowledge in nineteenth-century India was formed in relation to the functions of the colonial administration, as well as within various associations in civil society. By analysing how Indian political activists found and used social information in their quest for political reform, he shows how demands on the political executive were linked to forms of statistics, and socially concerned philosophy and economics. By using social research as a rhetorical base, activists were able to challenge the colonial political set-up.

In Chapter 13, Adrián Groglopo offers a case-study of social science in Latin America. He presents and analyses dependency theory and the concept of internal colonialism in its historical geopolitical context, and discusses their legacies and potential today. Dependency theory and theories of internal colonialism are presented as examples of social theories produced outside the metropolitan and hegemonic global North.

Chapter 14 analyses recent trends in research on Sámi reindeer-herding with regard to counter-hegemonic currents and indigenous methodologies. Ellen Inga Turi shows that traditional knowledge and indigenous epistemology have gained increased attention in research from the 1990s onwards, and argues that this development should not be described as a counter-hegemonic current, but rather as an effort to diversify hegemonic currents.

The book concludes with Raewyn Connell's essay on one avenue for the future—polycentric social science. She offers a historical, sociological, and global synthesis of several of the questions dealt with in the book, but which she has also been investigating over the last couple of decades. Since we are living in a globalized world, it is of increasing importance to take global social structures into account in any understanding of the role of the social sciences in today's society. But, as Connell argues, a global approach is important not only to our understanding of the current situation today, but also for the history of social science and its intrinsic relations between colonized and colonizer, between periphery and metropole, and the ways in which these have shaped the world which we live in today—our everyday lives.

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