

The Dilemmas of Contemporary Social Science

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For two hundred years, social science has provided the lens through which people view society and the visions animating most demands for political reform – at least since Adam Smith’s efforts to unleash the ‘invisible hand’ of the market without destroying the moral sentiments of society.¹ However, the perspectives of social science shift, as each new generation questions its predecessors, with import for politics as well as the academy. From time to time, therefore, we should reflect on them. In this essay I do so from the perspective of political science, mainly about American scholarship and with no pretense to comprehensiveness, but with a focus on the disciplinary intersections where so many have found Archimedean points. Intellectual developments in any one field are often ‘progressive’ in the scientific sense of that term.² But something can be lost as well as gained in the course of them, and there is reason for concern about the fate of social science over the past twenty-five years. What has been lost becomes clear only if we revisit the path taken.

The World We Have Lost

The three decades following the Second World War constituted *des trentes glorieuses* for social science. Although marked by the usual range of tones running from vainglory to despair, the voice of social science had a discernible ring. Deeply affected by the collapse of democracy in the Weimar republic and a holocaust that initially shattered whatever faith in progress survived the 1930s, post-war social science resurrected itself

around the theme of 'never again', at first somberly in Europe and then with growing self-confidence in America.

Some strands of this revival were built on critique. Out of the existential angst of Jean-Paul Sartre came a fierce political determination, reflected in the penetrating social criticism of Simone de Beauvoir.³ From the gloomy dialectics of the Frankfurt school, founded on a disappointment that seemed as much aesthetic as political, came Theodor Adorno's studies of the authoritarian personality and Herbert Marcuse's bitter critique of one dimensional man.⁴ Characteristic of the era were efforts to link the structures of society to the constitution of the person that found trenchant expression in the works of Thomas Luckmann and Michel Foucault and gentler echoes in the writings of Eric Erikson and Raymond Williams.⁵

Another strand, also largely European in inspiration and *marxisant* in tone, sought a better understanding of the macro-structures governing societies, exemplified by the structuralist anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss and Maurice Godelier and the efforts of Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas to explain the persistence of capitalism by reference to the operation of capitalist states.⁶ Others looked to a macro-history increasingly international in scope, visible in Fernand Braudel's portraits of Mediterranean society and Immanuel Wallerstein's conception of core and periphery.⁷ Despite their differences, these works sought the structural continuities that link societies and distribute power across time and space.

As is often the case, post-war American social science was more optimistic but not altogether different. Influenced by a cold war that was to be hot only on the periphery, American social science discovered what it called the 'developing world'.

Less traumatized by decolonization than the Europeans, Americans began to see this world as a terrain for ‘modernization’, whose endpoint was to be stable democracy and prosperous industrial capitalism. The pioneering studies of the SSRC Committee on Comparative Politics, W. W. Rostow’s analysis of the world economy, and Clark Kerr’s portrait of industrial man found, in the history of Europe and America, processes that might be portable to other parts of the globe.⁸

Inspired by this discovery, American scholars sought a more ‘scientific’ basis for generalizing about politics across time and space. David Easton’s early critique of existing approaches to politics, as antiquarian endeavors overly-focused on laws and formal constitutions, hit the field like a bombshell, and many began to look to the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons for alternative ways of construing the ‘political system’.⁹ Perplexed by the failure of the Weimar constitution to forestall fascism, they discovered culture, increasingly seen as the indispensable underlay for democracy. Efforts to study the political system sparked a ‘behavioral revolution,’ whose methodological individualism challenged structural perspectives.¹⁰ But these new approaches opened up dialogues with sociology and anthropology. By the 1970s, few political scientists had not read Clifford Geertz on ‘thick description’ or on ‘ideology as a cultural system’.¹¹

In Europe and America, post-war historians cultivated a new social history, whose focus on the modalities of material life uncovered a low politics alongside the traditional narrative of high politics, and an antidote to the historical idealism of Collingwood.¹² There were at least two veins to this social history. One sought explanations for historical turning-points in the tectonic socioeconomic movements that issue in conflicts

among social classes. Georges Lefebvre's treatment of the French revolution, like Christopher Hill's account of the English civil war, was never universally accepted but defined the framework for debate among a generation of historians ranging from Albert Soboul and Alfred Cobban to Lawrence Stone and Conrad Russell.¹³

The other vein in this new history arose from a desire to paint portraits of the daily life of ordinary people with the verisimilitude once reserved for patriarchs and kings. The French *Annales* school gained influence during the 1960s, to be succeeded during the 1970s by the 'history workshop' in Britain and the Bielefeld school in Germany.¹⁴ Such approaches came together in the work of historians such as E. P. Thompson, who assumed that social groups might be historical actors but were determined to understand how context animated their action rather than simply impute a historical role to them.¹⁵

By the 1960s, the terrain was set for a fruitful dialogue between history, political science, sociology, and economics. In large measure, that dialogue was organized around a modernization paradigm. Its premise was that history and politics are made from below, driven by socioeconomic processes that condition the formation of social classes and the political dilemmas facing societies. Despite profound differences between scholars who regarded value consensus as the bedrock of democratic stability and those who viewed democracy as a carapace for conflicting social interests, both saw industrialization as the architectonic process whose transformational power over social interests posed the fundamental challenge and opportunity for the modern age.

Among these analysts, there was no agreement about the endpoints or the route. Against those who saw ineluctable socioeconomic forces as the ultimate driver, others

argued for the determinative power of a politics built on institutions or ideals.¹⁶ What united them was a sense that secure generalizations could be found about the processes driving class formation and regime change, grounded in the premise that, despite local singularities, there are commonalities in the response to socioeconomic development. Indeed, the very concept of a ‘development’ – as distinct from an ‘event’ – was the touchstone for such works. If any one study can be said to represent this opus, albeit more pessimistic than many, it was Barrington Moore’s influential treatise on the *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

Economics was a vital partner in this dialogue, not least because the study of economic history was still central to the field. Debates about the origins of the industrial revolution, between the likes of Alexander Gerschenkron and David Landes, provided grist for the mills of sociology and political science.¹⁷ It was but a short step to the discovery of ‘proto-industrialization’ and ‘late late development’ and a natural concomitant to ask about the role of the state in economic development.¹⁸ A certain historicity leavened what might otherwise have been overly deterministic analyses. Instead of pounding through every particularity in front of it, this economics built up a multi-layered history.

Of course, the results were not uniformly praiseworthy. Even the best accounts missed part of the story. Modernization itself was soon exposed as a mirage, floating on an artificial separation between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’. Like all exuberant schools of thought, the social science of the 1960s produced some social prognoses that were overly optimistic, notably about the ease with which democracy could be secured,

and, in a cruel irony, it failed to predict the twentieth century's ultimate act of modernization – the collapse of communism in 1989.

But the interdisciplinary dialogue of the 1960s and 1970s had several features that appear, in retrospect, as advantages. It combined respect for historical specificity with a generalizing aspiration. Although these two features of inquiry are often in tension with one another, each is indispensable to social science. Generalizations lose their historical force if they cannot comprehend the realities of a specific context. They become the scholarly equivalent of Wilsonian idealism, aesthetically pleasing but so far from real life as to be dangerous if taken seriously. Absent a generalizing aspiration, however, social science becomes a series of postcards, providing glimpses into other worlds without much purchase on the one in which we have to live.

In political terms, post-war social science was a broad church with room for multiple sects. But it was also ultimately political, putting issues of human welfare at the center of inquiry. It was critical of the world but confident enough to try to improve it, and interdisciplinary dialogue provided a demanding crucible for ameliorative proposals. Not only did the disciplines of social science have a language in which to speak to one another, they believed they had the right to do so. Major works had to survive critique from other disciplines as well as their own.

Movement over Time

Over the past twenty-five years, social science has changed dramatically. The most striking development, especially in America, has been a bifurcation, separating scholars interested in culture from those concerned with material forces. On one side of the yard,

history and anthropology have moved closer to cultural studies. On the other, political science has edged toward economics. Like the kid left to play alone, American sociology has flirted with the others without being able to draw them into a game of its own.

The shift from social to cultural history was a natural development, yielding many benefits. The ink was barely dry on the protean formulations of the initial generation of social historians, who saw the stirrings of an embryonic bourgeoisie in the turning points of modern history, when their successors began to note how implausible it is to see classes as social actors. What many saw as self-conscious classes might only be disparate groups of individuals with diverse aspirations.¹⁹ A vast debate about why nineteenth century Britain avoided revolution was largely over before some began to question the relevant counterfactual, namely, why British workers should have been revolutionary in the first place.²⁰ Those critiques were telling. They drove a stake through the heart of analyses that assumed social classes should be the principal objects of historical study.

In much the same way, François Furet and his followers demolished views of the French revolution as a class struggle and of the Terror as simply an unfortunate episode within it. Instead, they portrayed the revolution as a chaotic catastrophe, born of discursive contradictions bubbling out of the old regime, thereby rendering the Terror its logical culmination and a cautionary tale about communism.²¹ Rarely has historical reinterpretation so successfully taken the wind out of the sails of the left, albeit with help from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's revelations about the Gulag.

A renewed attentiveness to the meanings actors attach to their words and actions was the *leitmotif* of such critiques. It inspired interest in the ways in which discourse reflects the temper of the times. That has turned out to be the temper of our times as

well. The 'cultural turn' in history coincided with the rise of a 'new historicism' in literary studies that sought the meaning of a work in the social and historical context out of which it was written.²² Its analogue was a political theory that insisted on seeing the great theorists, not as disembodied participants in timeless debates, but as inhabitants of conversations highly particular to specific times and places.²³

Such impulses were given immeasurable force by the rise of gender studies. Long written out of history by virtue of their limited role in high politics, women were rediscovered by pioneering social historians, who soon began to ask how they had been excluded from the public sphere in the first place.²⁴ One of the signal achievements of cultural history has been to expose the construction of categories as a process whereby power is distributed and lives enriched or consigned to misery.

Of course, the construction of categories is also of interest to literary scholars and, under the influence of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and others, many turned their attention, almost feverishly, to a political semiotics. Art historians discovered that 'low art' could be revealing about the signs of society, and the study of literature morphed into cultural studies. It was but a short step from deconstructing gender roles to delineating sexual roles and, for a period, literature departments seemed obsessed with sex. The prize in such work was to show that distinctions once seen as 'natural' are socially constructed and the logical follow-up a post-colonial studies that dissects the categories of race and empire and sub-altern studies that recover the lives missing from traditional histories. A glance at the journal, *Representations*, reveals how fruitful the grafts between history, cultural studies, and anthropology have been. Common-garden social historians began to look boring.

At roughly the same time, American political science experienced its own revolution, marked by the rise of a 'new institutionalism'. That came in several varieties. One was a reaction to the emphasis on consensus, pluralism, and political culture promoted by the behavioral revolution. Influenced by European analysis, American scholars sought a more structural understanding of political phenomena. In place of pluralism, they posited a polity organized by institutions, both formal and informal, structuring conflict among social groups so as to privilege some interests over others.²⁵ Reacting against the prevailing view of democratic governments as brokers among competing social interests, they began to 'bring the state back in' as a set of institutions organizing the outcomes of political conflict.²⁶ By the end of the 1970s, Theda Skocpol was arguing that revolutions are caused, not by uprisings from below, but by structural breakdown from above. Stephen Skowronek charted the development of a distinctive American state of courts and parties, and the new school of thought was dubbed 'historical institutionalism'.²⁷

During the same period, a group of rational choice analysts, devoted to models of politics deduced from parsimonious assumptions about rational action, began to incorporate institutions into their analyses. The result was an influential research program that saw politics as a set of collective action dilemmas and institutions as instruments for resolving them. Barry Weingast and William Marshall drew on the new economics of organization to describe the 'industrial organization' of Congress, while Elinor Ostrom developed an account of governing institutions as a set of solutions to common-pool resource problem.²⁸ From both of these directions, institutions became the subject matter

of political science. Culture went out with the bathwater, and class relations became the product, rather than the source, of institutional structures.²⁹

Both lines of inquiry pulled American political science closer toward economics. The rational-choice variant drew heavily on game theory, which was rapidly becoming the meat and potatoes of microeconomics, thereby integrating two disciplines by turning *homo politicus* into *homo economicus*. No longer seeing itself as a corrective to economic determinism, the new ‘positive political economy’ was defined as a field applying the methods of economics to the problems of politics. Historical institutionalists stopped short of this icy embrace, but began to investigate the political economy as a terrain structured by the organization of capital, labor and the state.³⁰ Over the next twenty years, many young scholars of comparative politics became political economists.

As this dialogue between economics and political science intensified, the terms in which it was conducted shifted, away from those in which a Hirschman could debate a Hoffmann.³¹ Economics itself has changed. Traditional economic history is now an endangered species, and the study of the history of economic thought virtually extinct. With a confidence once possessed only by the natural sciences, economics now regards its theories as so sound that there is no need to study their evolution, for much the same reasons that physics departments do not mount courses in the history of physics.

However, that same confidence has drawn economists toward a wider range of phenomena. They have a model and it will travel. Once Gary Becker had analyzed the family as an economic actor calculating its advantages, economists found few domains they were unwilling to tackle.³² They also rediscovered institutions, at least as vehicles

for forming credible commitments, resolving time inconsistency problems, and structuring strategic interaction.³³ As a result, the discipline became alert to new specificities of time and place, defined now in institutional terms.

What Has Been Lost?

Before turning to the costs of these disciplinary shifts, we should celebrate the gains. The intellectual quilt that history sews today is more richly-colored and intricately-patterned than some of the blankets of yesteryear. Translating the declining deference of the 1960s across time, historians now notice entire groups of people invisible to the high and low histories of previous eras. The same might be said of literary studies. After three decades of immersion in a post-modern bath, we see better how words become things and how much of what is taken for granted is socially constructed—the artifact, whether artful or not, of the efforts of the privileged to retain power and of the rest to go along so as to get along. Beside the studies of domestic pets in nineteenth century France are studies of the enforced domesticity of women that press us to reexamine our own world.

The new institutionalism has also been a salutary endeavor. With a new focus on strategic interaction, economics freed itself from the grip of marginalism.³⁴ Few concepts have ever illuminated more corners of the political economy than the contention that institutions can facilitate the formation of credible commitments. An emphasis on institutional practices revealed new dimensions of national polities and released political science from hydraulic images of politics as flotsam and jetsam responding mainly to waves of socioeconomic pressure.

Why might one be dissatisfied in the wake of these disciplinary twists and turns? At a minimum, there are signs that the main seams of ore in these research programs may have been exhausted. Of cultural studies one can ask: does anything remain to be deconstructed? What are the new insights yet to be gained? The post-modernist lens provided new ways of seeing the world, but it has now been finely ground. What will we learn from another study of gender relations at the turn of the last century?

Similar questions should be asked of cultural history, if only to inspire reflection on its future directions. The social and political histories of a previous era sought explanations for outcomes of social importance, whether devolving over long periods of time, such as changing familial relations, or seemingly sudden, such as the outbreak of the First World War. One could judge those histories, not only by elements in their craftsmanship, analogous to those distinguishing a Manet from a Valadon, but by how convincing their explanations were. By what terms should we judge cultural history today? In some studies, it can be difficult to find outcomes analogous to those historians once tackled and, therefore, to know what is at stake. Is cultural history an explanatory enterprise? If so, how do its explanations measure up against those that look beyond culture? Of course, history need not be explanatory just because other social scientists are interested in explanation.³⁵ By revealing other worlds, it widens the scope of our imagination. But, if history is not to be explanatory, why not? What will keep it from becoming an antiquarian enterprise of interest only to small numbers of enthusiasts?

My own discipline confronts equally challenging issues. Having discovered the hammer of credible commitments, is it useful for political science to go on banging it against ever more pegs? This literature has an increasingly formulaic quality. Of course,

as Lakatos advises, scientific research programs must hold onto a core heuristic.³⁶ But is this research program still progressive or degenerating around the edges? Its Achilles heel remains the assumption that people's fundamental preferences are constant over time and so general that they can be defined as the desire for power or material gain.³⁷ If preferences are that simple, such analyses can tell us much about the corresponding 'strategic preferences' and behavior of actors. But are the preferences of human beings not multifaceted, evolving, and conditioned by a wide range of factors? When someone decides to vote, is her preference influenced by her identity as a consumer, a Baptist, a shop clerk, an environmentalist or a mother? After three decades of rational choice analysis, the terrain between fundamental and strategic preferences remains *terra incognita*.³⁸

Inventive scholars are making efforts to resolve such dilemmas. Some have turned to a behavioral economics that uses experiments based on small groups or surveys to develop more realistic views of the strategies individuals deploy.³⁹ This is a step forward, even if it is not yet clear what to make of experiments showing that students concentrating in economics adopt strategies different from those pursued by students majoring in sociology.

In order to explore the plasticity of institutions, historical institutionalists are building bridges to coalitional analysis. They find that institutions in one sphere of the polity shape the interests actors have in institutional reform in other spheres.⁴⁰ This is a step beyond William Riker's conception of institutions as 'congealed preferences' but the marriage between institutional and coalitional analysis is far from consummated. We

keep bumping up against the observation that men make their own history but not just as they please.

However, the ability of political science to reach out to disciplines beyond economics is currently impeded by its own version of the culture wars, sparked by the imperial ambitions of those who seem to hope that rational choice analysis will provide a new master social science.⁴¹ As with most *missions civilisatrices*, the problem derives less from the faith than from the intolerance of the faithful. No one has yet been burned at the stake, but paradigm building has pushed out some of the playfulness crucial to creative inquiry. The discipline experienced such a struggle once before, in the age of the behavioral revolution, but few recall with what relish it ate its children or how contestable were the results.

If wear on the engines of its research programs accounts for some of the dilemmas encountered by social science, others originate in the gap that has opened up along its route – between a history linked to cultural studies, on one side, and a political science mesmerized by economics on the other. The problem is not simply that conversation across the divide has become more difficult. Far more serious are its effects on the types of inquiry being conducted on each side. On neither side are systematic explanations for political and economic outcomes being integrated with contextually informed analyses of social relations. Yet we need works of such combinatorial weight more than ever before, in a world where global endeavors cross multiple contexts.

Cultural historians know a great deal about social relations, but they have become skeptical about the explanatory enterprise. Paradoxically, many scholars in cultural studies are less inhibited. But, by choice, they are not social scientists. Their *métier* is to

interpret the world, and the canons of interpretation remain different from those of social science, whether construed in positivist or realist terms. One excels at finding the illuminating trope, while the other demands systematic application of evidence to the testing of theories. Even when they wear their theories lightly, historians have always been on the latter side of this divide. Thus, they occupy the pivotal position. Much depends on their willingness to engage with the explanatory ambitions of other social sciences.⁴² If some see this as consorting with a cruder class of folk, *noblesse oblige*.

However, contemporary political science and economics are also reluctant dance partners. Under the influence of rational choice theory, many are caught in the grip of a neo-materialism so monistic that it makes Marx's ruminations about false consciousness look like those of an idealist. As interlocutors, historical institutionalists offer more promise, but, having defined institutionalism as an alternative to cultural explanations, many are wary about importing culture back into their analyses. The popularity of constructivism among analysts of international relations is emblematic of a growing interest in culture, but the radicalism of constructivism often reproduces, rather than transcends, the divide.⁴³

An example drawn from current debates in political economy illustrates the problem. Why do Americans spend up to three hundred more hours a year at work than do many Europeans? This is an important puzzle, whose features reflect many social issues today. Studies of it have been illuminating. But, to stylize only slightly, the literature tends to consider two sorts of answers. One is that Europeans must have preferences for more leisure. The other is that preferences are similar on both sides of the Atlantic but the European economies are too inefficient to generate enough work.⁴⁴

Both hypotheses are likely true to some degree, but an optic that allows for variation only in revealed preferences for leisure and in the efficiency of the economy leaves out many of the factors that might explain such patterns. If Europeans prefer leisure, the problem is to explain those preferences. Much turns on the types of jobs on offer and the benefits paid those without work, but even these features of the political economy cannot adequately be described in terms of economic efficiency. They reflect successive episodes of decision-making in the context of historically-specific conflicts that cumulate over a hundred years into distinctive modes of industrial organization, personal attitudes towards work, and collective conceptions of social justice.

This point does not imply that one must forego generalization or write only local histories. But valid generalization about such issues demands attention to the political imaginations of particular times and places and to processes that institutionalize them over time. Models developed by analysts whose familiarity with the countries at hand rests on once flying over them are unlikely to suffice. Without effective interchange across the cultural/material divide, issues such as this will never be adequately addressed.

Although welcome, the dramatic advances made by cognitive neuroscience and molecular biology complicate these matters. They suggest that behaviors once attributed to ‘nurture’ rather than ‘nature’ may have physiological or genetic roots, raising with new force the question: just what is hard-wired into us and what is not? That poses a direct challenge to those who subscribe to the constitutive power of cultural frameworks and social relations. Most social scientists prefer to ignore such issues. But the days when they could do so with impunity are waning. What Robert Trivers calls “the social so-called sciences” are in danger of being eclipsed by a new intellectual hegemony that

privileges the ‘hard findings’ of economics and genetic science.⁴⁵ There are affinities between the ‘selfish gene’ and the ‘self-interested economic actor’ and both have enough plausibility to make ours a neo-Darwinian age. If the social sciences do not collaborate with the natural sciences on more refined frameworks, we will soon see new versions of Duesenberry’s dictum that ‘economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about how they don’t have any choices to make.’⁴⁶

Sociology, anthropology and psychology are crucial to that collaboration and have been given short shrift in this essay. That is partly a reflection of how attenuated their dialogue with political science and history has become. There are exceptions: sociology has been influential among scholars of race and immigration, who have broadened the study of class into the study of identity, and on research into social movements and the welfare state, two of the most important phenomena of the late twentieth century.⁴⁷ It remains a haven for those interested in the depredations of inequality.⁴⁸

Sociology was the architectonic discipline in America during the heyday of Talcott Parsons and Seymour Martin Lipset, but it turned away from high theory and the explanation of macro-level outcomes during the 1980s, just as new waves of democratization and development sent political science and economics in search of such theories.⁴⁹ Somehow Europe avoided this divorce between sociology, politics and economics, but social theory has become a European preserve, without the influence over American social science that Europeans achieved in cultural studies.⁵⁰

After years of intense introspection, influenced by a semiotic turn, social anthropology emerged with bridges to cultural studies but an aversion to the explanatory

models of the other social sciences.⁵¹ Social psychology went in the opposite direction, becoming more resolutely experimental, relegating Freud to the periphery in order to focus on debates whose intricacy other social scientists rarely penetrate.⁵² As behavioralism faded in favor of rational expectations models, the behavioral perspectives of psychology began to seem alien to political science and economics. That pendulum is now swinging back, but most political scientists would still be hard-pressed to name more than one or two social psychologists.

The Consequences for the Zeitgeist

These developments have had consequences well beyond the academy. American universities are still full of political liberals, but they are curiously dispirited. Despite some lively interventions by individuals, the intellectual impact of the political left, however construed, has been more limited over the past two decades than at any other conjuncture since the Second World War, in both the United States and Europe.

Of course, much of that has nothing to do with social science, but with the ‘move to the market’ inspired by the economic troubles of the 1970s, enshrined in the policies of successive administrations and the European Union, and reinforced by fiscal pressure on welfare states – not to mention the chilling effect of 9/11 in the U.S.. The path of recent policy seems to justify a skepticism about whether governments can offer solutions to pressing social problems that is permeating the universities as well as society. The formative context for young scholars today is, not the collapse of Weimar or the politics of the 1960s, but the experience of life under neo-liberalism and globalization.

However, shifts in the social sciences have also fueled political cynicism and eroded confidence in the possibility of alternative political projects. The ghost in the machine is the loss of faith in the modernist political vision that animated social science until the 1970s. That vision embraced Enlightenment ideals, regarded agitation on behalf of a working class as one of its best expressions, and saw the state as the political vehicle for realizing such aspirations.⁵³ One by one, each of these pillars has crumbled under an acid intellectual rain.

The locus of political radicalism in the academy, once firmly entrenched in the social sciences, has shifted toward cultural studies. More than a few on the left have reason to be grateful for that. However, much of the appeal of cultural studies lies in the critical power that post-modernist thought levels at Enlightenment ideals, exposing them as decidedly western in origin, naively optimistic, a cover for many forms of oppression, and prone to an overweening universalism insensitive to local values. Like the environmental movement, post-modernism is concerned about the preservation of local cultural ecologies. There is something praiseworthy in this commitment to diversity and liberating about its acts of exposure. If in any doubt about that, ask the students who flock to cultural studies in order to understand a wider world.

For the purposes of social reform, however, cultural studies is a toothless dragon. Although a source of pungent social commentary, it lacks the tools for systematic investigation of social problems and a taste for fashioning practical solutions to them. Michel Foucault opens our eyes to many features of the world, but few would want to put him in charge of a department for social services. There is something disabling, as well as liberating, about post-modernist thought. Its relativizing force has shaken our confidence

in Enlightenment ideals, without providing much that could take their place. Sometimes, the endpoint of critique was only further critique. To advocate perhaps, but to act? To sleep, perchance to dream? For those seeking terrain on which to establish a political program, cultural studies offer quicksand. In the certainties of neo-classical economics and religious ideals, the political right found more solid ground from which to fight.

The collapse of the modernist ideal has also left social science without a firm sense of political agency. Post-modernism cannot supply it. There is something oddly similar between the radicalism of Michel Foucault and the conservatism of Michael Oakeshott.⁵⁴ Each sees the webs we weave as such complex constructions that it seems foolhardy to imagine disassembling them. Both find something risible in projects of reform. Informed by visions of the polity as a vehicle that social classes could use to secure power and tame markets, post-war social science was more optimistic. But, when it deconstructed classes and dismantled that heroic narrative, social science severed the links between its past projects and those it might embrace today. It was as if we had indeed reached the ‘end of history’.⁵⁵

History has helped us along. The concept of the working class as historical subject was always a partial fiction, if valuable for the attention it directed toward the lives of those at the bottom of the social pyramid. As prosperity and attendant social benefits mitigated social deprivation and a service economy fragmented the industrial working class, that fiction became increasingly implausible. The shift from a social history focused on the working class toward a cultural history attentive to other identities merely ratifies such developments.

Some would like a new politics, but no one is sure who will make it. The new institutionalism has not helped. By emphasizing the institutions that structure social and political life, the new institutionalism has constructed an iron cage of its own, which does not make much room for positive political agency. In mainstream political science, the closest analogue to a historical agent seems to be the ‘median voter’, who is conservative by definition: concerned to preserve at least the status quo, beset with uncertainty, and willing to improve the situation of the poor only if it improves her situation as well.

Linked to these developments is a widespread loss of confidence in the capacity of states to intervene effectively on behalf of ordinary people. On this point, there is something to be said for caution: governments have often failed to live up to the modernist ideal. But rarely has the academy seemed so willing, by implication if not intent, to endorse a neo-liberal age. Despite their concern for declining levels of trust in government, many political scientists model politicians as nefarious creatures, concerned only about reelection or material gain, presiding over self-interested citizens in *sauve-qui-peut* societies. Their accounts leave little room for idealistic political endeavor, just as institutional analysis squeezes out the political imagination. In this Hobbesian image of collective life as a struggle for survival of the fittest, there are elements of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The irony is that we live in an era of rising inequality, when many are suffering as much as their predecessors did four decades ago. Even without the tales compiled by Pierre Bourdieu, collective consciousness of the plight of immigrants, minorities, and the poor seems no less acute now than it was then.⁵⁶ What is lacking is any sense that there

are collective political vehicles for addressing it. It is as if social science has come to believe in the blackest of its formulations.

Ever idealistic, the young have turned to an array of voluntary organizations, many with transnational ambitions, mirroring the efflorescence of philanthropic activity in a Victorian era equally skeptical about the capacities of states.⁵⁷ Some good will come of this. But a thousand points of light are no substitute for the concerted power that states can bring to bear on social problems or for the political movements that rouse them to action.

For inspiration and a sense of what is possible, such movements have looked historically to social science. What they find there today is a gulf between those who study the material dimensions of human relations and those who study its cultural dimensions. Each has a handle on one side of the possible. One considers what we do, the other what we dream of doing. To focus only on the latter is folly if the search is for practical solutions to social problems, but to consider only the former is to miss the creative potential in political life. Social scientists do not get the governments they deserve any more than most people do. But, more than most, they can shape the contours of their world, if they know what they are doing. Maybe it is time to ask what we are doing.

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¹ Compare the observation of John Maynard Keynes that “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually slaves to some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.” *General Theory of Employment Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan 1936): ch. 24.

² On scientific progress, see Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds. *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

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³⁵ These are not simple questions because they entail considering what it means to 'explain' a phenomenon. Cf. Clayton Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

³⁶ Lakatos and Musgrave, *op. cit.*

³⁷ From the perspective of this literature, an actor's 'fundamental' preferences are those given exogenously to the analysis and her 'strategic' preferences are those conditioned by the character of strategic interaction.

³⁸ Cf. Peter A. Hall, "'Preference Formation as a Political Process; The Case of European Monetary Union" in *Preferences and Situations*, eds. Ira Katznelson and Barry Weingast (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005): 129-60.

³⁹ For the seminal work, see Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, eds. *Judgment under Uncertainty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴⁰ Peter Swenson, *Capitalists Against Markets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴¹ See the debate in *APSA-CP* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1994).

⁴² For an exemplary effort to do so, see: William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴³ Cf. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Recent work on 'social capital' provides another beachhead. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁴⁴ Edward C. Prescott, "Why Do Americans Work So Much More than Europeans?" *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (July 2004): 2-13; Olivier Blanchard, "The Economic Future of Europe," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 4 (2004): 3-26. For a broader analysis, see: Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser and Bruce Sacerdote, "Work and Leisure in the U.S. and Europe." National Bureau of Economic Research Working Papers, no. 11278 (April 2005).

⁴⁵ Drake Bennett, "The Evolutionary Revolutionary," *Boston Globe* (March 25, 2005); Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). For an example of the influence of such views, see Lawrence H. Summers, "Remarks at NBER Conference about Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce." Cambridge, Mass. January 14, 2005.

⁴⁶ James S. Duesenberry, "Comment on Gary Becker's 'An Economic Analysis of Fertility'" in *Demographic and Economic Change in Developed Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960): 233.

⁴⁷ For examples, see: Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Gösta Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴⁸ For example, Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Katherine S. Newman, *No Shame in My Game* (New York: Vintage, 2000)

⁴⁹ Parsons, *op. cit.*; Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1949); Erving Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1959); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1959). Cf. Charles Tilly, "To Explain Political Processes," *American Journal of Sociology*, 100, 6 (1995): 1594-1610.

⁵⁰ Among European social theorists, the notable exception is Jürgen Habermas, whose work has been read widely across fields. However, few American scholars outside sociology read Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Boudon or Ulrich Beck. By contrast, European sociology remains influential across disciplines. For representative works, see Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) and Marino Regini, *Uncertain Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵¹ For recent overviews, see Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001);

⁵² One exception was scholarship about race and gender discrimination, where bridges to psychology were built, and there may be potential for more in the growing field of cultural psychology. See Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998).

⁵³ Cf. Samuel H. Beer, *Modern Political Development* (New York: Random House, 1974).

⁵⁴ Foucault, *op. cit.*; Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962).

⁵⁵ Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper, 1993).

⁵⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

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