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Some Remarks on the Development of International Social Science

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SOME REMARKS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

by

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ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

In analysing the present state, the trends and the potential development of international social science one has to look on the one hand at the institutional set-up, its economic basis and at other influences on its functioning, and on the other hand at the main paradigms, theories, and methods being applied and at the issues being treated as well as at the historical development in all parts of the world along all these dimensions.

The following sketch must, due to the dearth of data, be largely based on personal impressions and can, of course, only be a very rough approximation of the situation.

A. THE 'OLD STRUCTURE'

In carrying out such an analysis one cannot escape recognizing the existence of a whole series of imbalances in the world structure of the social sciences.

The present world distribution of financial expenditures for social science research is highly uneven with the bulk of it spent in North America and Western Europe.

According to the limited information available it seems that the present international distribution of trained social scientists is not very different from that found in the research carried out in preparation of the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development (largely concentrating on scientists involved in technical R & D) which come to a share of hardly 13 percent for all developing countries (China excluded). / J. Annersted, 1979 /

Training in the social sciences is very often received either directly from foreigners, when students go abroad with scholarships offered to them, or at the postgraduate level for teaching assistantships or research fellowships, or from academic teachers, who themselves have been trained abroad. The textbooks are often of foreign origin or derived from foreign textbooks without much adaptation to the prevailing situation in the country where they are being used. / Y. Atal, 1980, pp. 14 - 16 /

Social science publishing is still largely concentrated in the industrialized countries, albeit with some notable exceptions such as India or Mexico. This still holds for scientific journals, for monographs, readers, and also for publications used as reference works in academic training.

The reward and incentive system in the social sciences - by fact and by perception - is still dominated by the industrialized world. Foreign degrees and publication abroad still have higher academic respectability than national degrees or publication in the home country. Participation in international scientific conferences and other sustained forms of contact heighten academic status and may lead to participation in internationally funded research projects.

The pattern of relationships of the different social science communities in the world are very uneven. / S. Amin et al., 1975 /

If one looks at the number and intensity of international contacts among social science institutions and researchers and would draw a map of such communications one would find a rather limited number of areas which have a very high density of contacts going in all directions and many which have a rather limited number of contacts which are geographically not very diversified.

The areas of high density very often coincide with the former colonial centers which have their contacts with the other industrialized countries, their former colonies and a number of other countries in the African, Arab, Asian and Latin American regions. A lower level of density appears between the other industrialized countries.

Inter-Third-World contacts between social science institutions within the same region are only few and limited. Cooperation between institutions located on different Third World continents is on such a small scale that it can be regarded as almost non-existent.

A relatively large number of foreign researchers from industrialized countries carry out research in developing countries while there are hardly any researchers from the developing countries studying the problems of the industrialized countries.

The researched country derives little academic or practical benefit. The publications concerned are often in languages that are not understood in the developing country. The detailed data are often taken back to the researcher's country with him and are therefore not available to the developing country.

EFFECTS OF THE OLD STRUCTURE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Overall effect

Development strategy did not produce the results hoped for.

This led to a growing awareness that the problem-solving models

- contained in the accepted development strategies had largely been developed in the North;
- were, therefore, based on scientific knowledge developed on the basis of social realities that were quite different from those obtaining in the developing countries;

and must, by their very nature, produce different results than the ones claimed.

Effect on values and attitudes of the social scientists

The geographical concentration in the North of the earlier phases of the development of the social sciences, the sheer volume of production of Northern social science, and its (in certain respects) sophisticated techniques on the one hand and their introduction in African, Arab, and Asian countries during the colonial period, the continuation of economic dependence after political independence, the deployment of social science in the preparation of development plans and projects, the dominance of Northern content in the training of social scientists of Third World origin, as well as the system of recognition, incentives and more generally of rewards to which the latter were exposed on the other hand, led to a high degree of internalization of Northern values - a state which has been termed "borrowed consciousness". / Y. Atal, 1. 80, p. 8 - 11 /

Effect on the selection of aspects of social realities to be studied

This dominant orientation on the North led to wide acceptance of the concerns which the North considered most important for development.

Since Northerners necessarily see the social and cultural realities of Southern countries through the spectacles of their theoretical and practical experience largely gained in the North, their understanding and interpretations will always differ from those of people having been brought up in these countries.

Both, Northern concerns and Northern interpretations do not necessarily focus on

the issues most important in the context of the developing country concerned.

In addition, the much more down to earth aspects of funding - be it in the form of the participation of social scientists in the preparation of development projects for submission to Northern sources of financing, which have to follow Northern ways of reasoning and contain the kind of analyses expected; of financial support for the creation and functioning of social science institutions; or of financial support for participation in international research projects - lead to the use of a relatively large proportion of social science capacity for work along those lines.

The result of the working of these mechanisms created distortions in the determination of research priorities.

Effect on the statement of the problem

The external orientation produces an overall influence on the way research is planned and problems are stated, the results of which can be likened to the effects of modern advertising. It results in the constant use of approaches to problems and interpretation models originating in foreign societies with different structures and value systems without seriously asking whether they are pertinent.

As a consequence, analytical frameworks and concepts containing unstated assumptions about the relations between factors which have an influence on the subject matter studied and which may be alien to the society in question may be used to try and gain new insights into the existing social reality.

The advertisement effect often prevents efforts at disaggregation of the analytical framework which would allow the identification of assumed relationships and, if needed, their adaptation and/or the introduction of additional relationships, or, in the same vein, to pose the very research-worthy question of their applicability.

This effect makes it difficult for social scientists in the Third World to acquire a real understanding of their own social structures characterised as they are by other conditions and partly different values.

Effect on methods and techniques employed

The implication of the 'Old Structure' for choice of methods and techniques to be employed follow rather closely the pattern just described.

The structure of the models used, the approaches to the choice and treatment of variables as well as to the strategies for empirical work, methods of estimation, levels of aggregation, the kind of data and their eventual substitution in case of non-availability, the methods of data gathering, etc. will tend to follow those considered as being the accepted and most sophisticated ones described in the

foreign literature. While adaptation has often been necessary it has usually occurred for technical reasons rather than for reasons of applicability of the conceptual apparatus.

THE REACTION TO THE 'OLD STRUCTURE'

As a reaction first to colonialism and later to economic dependence despite political independence as well as to the limited results development strategies achieved in relation to the expectations raised, a movement for independence and later for self-reliance emerged and grew stronger and wider over the years.

Awareness of the lack of fit between Northern discourse and action in relation to development, between development recipes and actual economic and social development, as well as between the orientations of Northern social science and the intellectual traditions of Southern cultures started to grow.

As a result political decision-makers in a number of developing countries developed a very sensitive attitude towards research carried out by foreigners in their countries which led in many instances to subjecting such research projects to authorization or even to a total ban.

With the growing strength of self-consciousness and the spread of a critical attitude towards foreign intellectual domination (and in some cases toward almost everything foreign) social scientists also started to react against the 'Old Structure' of the international social science system and its implications.

A rhetoric of counter attack / T. N. Madan, 1980, p. 22 / spread much wider than the actual and pursued search for alternatives in development and/or for indigenization in the social sciences. However, this rhetoric and its wide acceptance seems to constitute an essential phase ('the reactive phase' / Y. Atal, 1980, p. 5, citing R. Kothari /) in the efforts aiming at emancipation from the value biases of Northern concepts and postulates of reasoning.

In parallel efforts at institutional emancipation developed and took the form of a process of institutional regionalisation in the course of which regional institutions and networks were established and started to function. / OECD Development Centre, Liaison Bulletin, various volumes and issues /

With a time lag of some years some - more or less systematic - efforts appeared in a limited number of African, Arab, Asian and Latin American countries aiming at creating the theoretical bases for a development of a social science relevant to their socio-cultural settings as well as to the historic experience and aspirations of their people.

TOWARDS A NEW STRUCTURE AND PATTERNS OF RELATIONSHIPS

The distribution of financial expenditures for social science research on a world level does not seem to be changing much.

While remaining an important dimension the financial aspects should not be taken as giving the full picture since financial expenditure is a measure which distorts the picture rather importantly.

If one looks at the development of social science capacities in Third World countries it seems beyond doubt that they have been growing in absolute terms as regards the numbers both of trained social scientists and of social science research institutions. If the parallel with training of natural scientists and engineers is applicable, these capacities are also growing in relative terms as a share of the world potential.

As concerns the content of training in the social sciences it seems clear that in many Third World countries the external orientation is still much stronger than one can consider healthy. / UNESCO, 1977, pp. 7 - 11 /

On the other hand, the generations that have almost exclusively been trained abroad who are holding major positions in academic training are gradually being replaced by generations of teachers a much larger part of which has been trained within the country or its region.

The prestige and reward system of the old structure seems to be largely intact. However, it seems as if a parallel system is slowly getting established partly on the national and partly at the regional level which holds promise for the future.

The need for a "critical mass"

One aspect which seems essential for reducing external orientation to an amount of interaction with abroad which can be considered useful or even necessary is the build-up of a critical mass of social scientists. / M. Madrazo Garamendi, forthcoming /

In this context it is necessary to qualify what has been said earlier about the growth of social science research capacity. In order to reach critical masses it is not enough that the total number of social scientists increases. Critical masses have to be reached in all disciplines considered important and not only in these disciplines but also as regards the research on particular problem areas and even on particular problems.

Institutional approaches to reaching critical masses

Basically there are two ways of creating critical masses.

The first consists of creating an institution (or enlarging an existing one) in which a large enough number of specialists are assembled to constitute a critical mass. This can be done at the national, subregional or regional levels. This approach has been followed in a number of fields and has taken the form of the creation of regional institutions.

While this approach has the advantage of making a high degree of interaction possible, it has the disadvantages that

- it is not likely to be carried out for most of the problem areas, for which it would be necessary to create critical masses, due to the high cost involved;
- it excludes many of the researchers who are specializing in this problem area, but who cannot - for lack of funds or any other reason - join the new institution;
- lastly, but most importantly, it loses the contact with social realities in the countries of the region which is absolutely essential in social sciences (an example for this last phenomenon from the field of agricultural research are the institutes and centers sponsored by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research - CGIAR - which despite of a lot of funds and high quality of the knowledge produced have not brought wide changes in agricultural practice due to the lack of regular contacts with national institutions whose participation would be essential for that purpose / B. Bengtsson, 1980 /).

The second approach consists of building networks of social scientists who work on the same or similar problems. In this approach the researchers stay within their (often relatively small) institutes which are usually geographically widely dispersed but are given the possibility to meet at intervals and part of the research funds needed. The institutes, in which the participating social scientists work carry a larger or smaller part of the costs involved (e.g. administrative overheads, documentation, part of the researchers' salaries, etc.).

With the exception of the frequency of interaction this approach gains on all criteria over the first approach:

- it is cheaper;
- there is no need to exclude specialists in the field concerned;
- there is no loss of contact with the social reality of the country concerned;
- it prevents duplication (which in the case of regional centers is likely to occur since not all countries will be willing to stop work in the field concerned).

From (unbalanced) international
via regional
towards inter-regional cooperation

The efforts to institutionalize multilateral cooperation of social science (development-oriented) research institutes at the international level first took the form of regular meetings of directors of such institutes on a world-wide basis. Due to the state of institutional development of that kind of research these meetings were numerically dominated by Western institutes.

With the growing awareness of the effects of Northern domination in the social sciences, regional associations working along the network approach started to be created first in Latin America (CLACSO 1967) followed by Asia (ADIPA 1971) and Africa (CODESRIA 1973), Europe (EADI 1975) and the Arab region (AICARDES 1977).

These regional social science networks greatly increased cooperation within their respective areas by creating sub-networks and research groups to study particular problem areas as well as by bringing together representatives of their member institutes at the occasion of their general assemblies or general conferences. CLACSO especially created a number of additional mechanisms or programmes to further the development of the social sciences as well as cooperation in the social sciences within the region.

Once four of the now five associations were functioning, multilateral cooperation on the world level could be re-institutionalized - this time on the basis of equal representation of the regions in Inter-regional Meetings on Development Research, Education and Communication. Out of the first such meeting sprang the idea which was effectuated a few months later by setting-up the Inter-regional Coordinating Committee of Development Associations (ICCDA) which is a coordinating instrument in which each of the regional association keeps its full autonomy. / OECD Development Centre, Liaison Bulletin, various volumes and issues /

The ICCDA network now serves as the major actor of technical cooperation among developing countries in the social sciences as well as being the broadest based multi-disciplinary network of social science institutes in the world. / United Nations, 1981 a and United Nations, 1981 b /

FROM THE CLAIM OF UNIVERSALITY
VIA ACTIVE PROMOTION OF SPECIFICITY
TOWARDS UNIVERSALITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

As long as most of the body of social science knowledge derives from observation of Northern realities and has passed through Northern interpretation and classification filters, any claim to universality of that body of knowledge remains unfounded.

So-called "general theories" in the social sciences thus established are, therefore, only "theories of the special case" - the Northern one. / ICCDA, 1978 /

The acceptance of that body of knowledge as being universal is not only scientifically unfounded, but it is - from a science policy point of view - also counterproductive. It is counterproductive because it supports (or even creates) the assumption that particular parts of the knowledge are also valid and relevant in other parts of the world.

On Truth and Validity of social science knowledge in different contexts

If the relationship between two objects (factors) in socio-historic setting A is scientifically established beyond doubt, it follows that the knowledge thus established is both true and valid in that particular socio-historic setting.

In socio-historic setting B the same relationship may exist, but it may also differ.

Assuming it differs, the knowledge about the relationship in socio-historic setting A remains true, but nevertheless it will not be valid in socio-historic setting B. If in this case (explicit or - more likely - implicit) use of knowledge derived from setting A is made in setting B it must necessarily lead to wrong results.

On the Relative Importance of Social Science Knowledge

Another issue relates to the relative importance of knowledge.

Even assuming - continuing the above example - that the same relationship exists in both socio-historic settings, i.e. the knowledge derived from setting A is also valid in setting B, the relative importance of that knowledge vis-a-vis the relationships

between other objects (factors) or vis-a-vis the relationships of the same objects (factors) with other objects (factors) may differ greatly.

If one assumes that the explanatory value of the relationship between the two objects (factors) in setting A is higher than that of any other relationship in that same socio-historic setting and if the knowledge of its explanatory value is used in setting B, where its explanatory value may be of less relative importance, it may lead to the neglect of research into other relationships which may be of greater relative importance in the latter setting.

On Time Specificity of Social Science Knowledge

It may be useful to discuss one aspect separately, which has already been implicitly included in the above argument, namely, that scientific knowledge in the social sciences is also time-specific. In other words, what may be true / valid / important today may no longer be true / valid / important in relation to a situation in the future.

In living contexts, which are the object of the social sciences, some of the components which together constitute its texture may cease to exist while new ones may appear. Similarly the relationships among the components and their relative importance change over time. Knowledge that is scientifically true at a given moment in time will remain true for that historic context but may no longer be valid or important in a later time period.

(To take an example from economics: it seems difficult to assert that the explanatory value of knowledge about the functioning of a perfect market has the same relative importance today that it had 100 years ago.)

Intensification of Research into Socio-Historic Specificity

The first dimension, along which intensification of research into socio-historic specificity is needed, is of a general character.

If one accepts the above it follows that it is important to try and identify the differences between the structure of relationships of objects (factors) implicitly assumed in an analytical framework of foreign origin on the one hand and the scientific knowledge and/or pre-scientific perception of the structure of such relationships in the society in which its use is intended on the other.

It seems to me that a disaggregation of the analytical framework, the adaptation

and/or exchange of certain assumptions, and a recomposition of the analytical framework should become a routine operation prior to the use of such frameworks originating abroad. Depending on the results of such endeavours the development of new analytical frameworks will be needed in quite a number of cases.

The second major dimension of specificity needing active promotion relates to the whole field of culture, of value systems and the aspirations of the people of the societies in question. (Northern societies have a rather specific idea of progress, for example.)

This second dimension is, however, an area which I feel should be further developed first and foremost by social scientists from the societies in question, since Northern analysis, as to how this dimension can best be developed, might all too easily distort the issues.

Given the strong influences favouring the use of analytical frameworks and asking questions which originate abroad, a conscious effort of actively promoting research on specificities all over the world is called for.

Towards Universality in the Social Sciences

It is through the incorporation of social science knowledge derived from different socio-historic settings that the development of international social science is likely to get its most important impetus.

In this process many of the hitherto cherished paradigms and concepts will have to give way to new insights and theoretic constructs.

This process will bring the body of social science knowledge closer to its claimed universality.

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