

World Social Science Conference Theme

ONE PLANET – WORLDS APART?

The peoples of the world are increasingly integrated into a global economy. National industries are interwoven in cross-national production networks, raw materials are drawn from all corners of the world, capital flows are crisscrossing state boundaries, communication connects the remotest parts of the earth and consumption in all countries is becoming more cosmopolitan by the day. New linking technologies such as satellites, the Internet and GPS gird the planet, and the content of new media has homogenizing impacts on world culture.

The peoples of the world are also connected by a growing number of institutions, public and private, ranging from the World Meteorological Organization to the African Union, from La Francophonie to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, from ASEAN to Mercosur, from Red Crescent to The International Social Science Council. At the individual level students abroad count millions and their number grows every year. Global travel has increased dramatically – in 2007 there were 900 million international tourist arrivals. And the peoples of the world are all becoming more interdependent by the spread and use of the same facilities, such as UTC, Windows or Google, and by sharing the same news. Science and research is one of the most fantastic things humans have learned to do together: ideas are developed and concepts exchanged across all borders: footnotes are globetrotters – as are viruses.

In spite of all the unifying forces – technological, economic, political and cultural – the world is one of great divides. Not just oceans and mountains separate peoples – there are enormous gulfs in wealth and health. The map of poverty depicts intractable geographical inequalities. Infant mortalities and life expectancies show great disparities, as does education.

THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF A SHRINKING WORLD

The planet is becoming more crowded – world population is projected to grow by 50 percent in the first 50 years of this century, and life expectancies are increasing.

The planet is becoming more intermingled – migration both between countries and continents is increasing. Many are dislodged by expanding trade, many seek opportunities by going abroad. Many are leaving home – internal mobility is also high: in twenty years more than two thirds of the world population will be living in cities. More communities are multiethnic.

The planet is becoming more polluted. Emissions of CO₂ and waste that harms air, soil and water are increasing. Climate change will affect everybody, but its impacts will vary greatly geographically and socially. Growth is outpacing the supply of resources; the world economy strains the limits of a finite earth, which sets the stage for more geopolitical competition.

The planet is becoming more unequal. Though millions have been lifted out of poverty, the spectre of hunger is again appearing – some states balance on the brink of catastrophe. The capacities of countries to cope with new threats from climate change or epidemics vary greatly. The risks for peoples and regimes are highly uneven.

The planet is becoming more juxtaposed – residues from many eras are simultaneously on the stage: tribal loyalties in modern states, ancient religions in secular societies, pre-scientific ideas in high-tech cultures – burkas and blue jeans can be seen in the same streets. In modern societies different epochs are co-existing – but not without tensions and not always peacefully.

The planet is shrinking. A twelve-hour flight can take you from a city with the greatest opulence to a shantytown with the greatest destitution. Yet due to modern communication, even in the most abject quarters the poor can see what they do not have and hence sense more acutely their deprivation: What they see is what they cannot get.

Hence we are living in a dynamic world whose culture, economy and demography is changing by the day. But the world is not one world and responses to the forces at work are lagging. To cope is not just a question of understanding globalization but of appreciating foreign cultures, being sensitive to changing contexts and responsive to national systems.

SOCIAL SCIENCE: PROVIDING BLUEPRINTS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

While the technologies we use in our everyday lives are, to a large extent, the spin-offs of natural science, the arrangements within which national and global development has taken place have to a large extent been the spin-offs of ideas taken from the social sciences.

- The separation of powers or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 can trace its history to Enlightenment philosophers.
- After the Second World War the Bretton Woods agreements resulted in a foreign exchange rate system and global organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Their underpinning was economic theories about how to transcend the counterproductive beggar-thy-neighbour-policies of the inter-war years and how to promote full employment and economic growth by free trade.
- Great political experiments in the 20th century in all parts of the world were based on various versions of Marxist theory.
- UNESCO was built on a psychological model of human beings encapsulated in the very first sentence of the preamble to its constitution: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." If peace is to be secured, it cannot be based "exclusively on political and economic arrangements but must be founded on the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."
- The welfare states constructed in the second half of the 20th century were predicated on theories about the political and social benefits of public economic arrangements.
- Development in the third world has been strongly influenced by theorists ranging from W. W. Rostow to Gunnar Myrdal and André Gunder Frank, and by intellectual frameworks ranking from dependency theory to The Washington Consensus.

In short, social theories have had enormous impacts on the construction of the modern world – on how nations have been built, institutions cast, citizens empowered, alliances constructed, currencies based, trade organized, education provided and identities forged. Today social science research is widely used to provide decision support in all fields, from reducing poverty to enhancing education, from improving gender relations to fighting HIV/AIDS. The importance of social science has been heightened in proportion to the effects of human actions on global conditions – notably with respect to climate change. Social science contributes to the way decisions are framed and decision makers in all countries and in all areas apply social science more and more.

So more social science is done and more social science is used – yet social theories are sometimes incomplete, deficient or wrong. The great British economist John Maynard Keynes put it this way: "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist." Social change has, of course, also been strongly influenced by other notions than those of the social sciences – e.g. by popular beliefs, ideological doctrines, political myths – and common sense.

Taken together, all these strains of thought – some well taken, some badly misconceived – have resulted in vast changes that have not been intended and social consequences that have not been anticipated.

In this new century the world will confront and will have to cope with and manage multiple, simultaneous and intertwined crises, e.g. how to

- reduce the gap between rich and poor – and at the same time address climate change;
- promote economic growth – and at the same time bring about sustainable development;
- raise life expectancies – and at the same time manage growing populations;
- expand international exchange – and at the same time counter the threat of pandemics;
- promote universal values – and at the same time maintain cultural diversity;
- ensure secular concord – and at the same time respect the return of religion as a global force.

Nothing encapsulates the paradox of “one planet, worlds apart” more than the rituals of modern airport security, where every passenger is stripped of all paraphernalia, scanned and searched before allowed to pass into departure halls that more and more look alike – a symbol, indeed, of a world more integrated, yet more vulnerable and more insecure. The most pessimistic have written about the potential for a “clash of civilizations.” But everyone is aware that the blue planet is fragile, yet without quite knowing where all the risks are or how to tackle them.

CHALLENGES TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

To address these issues the social sciences have no magic formula and no quick fix. We know that there is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the geographical range of the impacts climate change, population dynamics and global trade, etc; and on the other hand, the reach of the institutions that try to cope with them. We know that we have to redesign economic policies and political arrangements – and change fixed mindsets as well.

The social sciences develop and test models and interpretations of individuals and society in order to explain how humans behave and change in interaction with each other and with the natural world. Social scientists devise models not just of society, but also for society – what can be done for better futures.

Yet in many ways the social sciences themselves are fragmented. Indeed, some argue that the disciplines are in disorder – that there is not one social science, but many. Rather than one paradigm, there are competing schools: If there is one planet with worlds apart, there is also the problem of the social sciences not being on the same map.

So, in order to address the state of the world it is also necessary to address the state of the art. In order to make social science relevant, pertinent and potent, social scientists have to scrutinize their own concepts about how society works, and engage in vigorous self-examination of how their approaches fare in order to define common tasks and set a shared agenda.