

# Preface

## One planet, worlds apart – same map?

### A celebration of success

Never before have there been so many social scientists in the world – many more than the 200,000 population of Margaret Mead’s famous Samoa. Never before have the social sciences been so influential: economists run ministries of finance, political scientists staff public administrations and MBAs run corporations. Indeed, social scientists have not just entered boardrooms, but since Kinsey also bedrooms. Never before have social scientists had such an impact on public opinion, in terms of both how the world is seen and how it is acted upon. Terms that were once specialized – for example, ‘comparative advantage’ or ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ – dot the media and have entered everyday language. However, in spite of this impact, humans face crises that tax their understanding and their capacity to cope.

### Social science: a mixed blessing

Social scientists’ foresight has been poor at key junctures, and social science’s influence a mixed blessing. Social scientists did not foresee the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which was afterwards prominently interpreted as ‘the end of history’<sup>1</sup> – the final victory of constitutional democracy and free markets. As the current economic crisis was unfurling in October 2008, Alan Greenspan, recognized as ‘the maestro’, and the chair of the US Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006, conceded that his free-market conception of shunning regulation was deficient. ‘Yes, I found a flaw’, he said in a congressional hearing: ‘That is precisely the reason I was shocked because I’d been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well.’<sup>2</sup> His social science map no longer provided guidance. In Malawi, the World Bank has undertaken self-criticism for pushing private markets, opposing government regulation and fertilizer subsidies aimed at promoting cash crops for exports – a policy that resulted in food shortages.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, from Marx and Myrdal to the Washington consensus, development theories have been only modestly successful.

Furthermore, part of the diagnosis of the present global economic predicament is that social scientists were instrumental in constructing – or misconstruing – both the toxic ‘financial instruments’ and flawed institutions. More than that, social scientists, sometimes for opportunistic reasons, did not understand how their own creation worked or monitor how it unfolded. In short: if it is not good when the social science models of the world are misconstrued, it is even worse when its models for the world lead to misconstruction of the world itself.<sup>4</sup>

### A confluence of crises, increasing demand for social science

Notwithstanding these, and no doubt other, problems, the demand for more social science and better social science is likely to increase. This is the result of the state of the world, and more specifically of what could be called ‘a confluence of crises’: that is, contemporary crises that mutually reinforce one another. The climate is worsening, largely as a result of human activities, and the consequences of this change will be dire for humans. Given modern modes of travel, epidemics can spread faster than at any previous time in human history. Economically, the world faced the worst global crisis since the 1930s in 2008–09. Social conflicts arising from divergent religious worldviews have multiplied. These crises prove that the planet is one indeed, and one commons at that.

The planet is becoming more crowded – more than 2 billion people will be added to the global population over the next 40 years.<sup>5</sup> The world’s population is not just growing, it is also greying, with dependency ratios increasing on all

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1. Francis Fukuyama, 1992, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press.

2. *New York Times*, 23 October 2008.

3. ‘Ending famine, simply by ignoring the experts’, *New York Times*, 2 December 2007.

4. See, for example, the commentary by Harvard professor Dani Rodrik, ‘Blame the economists, not economics’, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/rodrik29> (accessed 3 March 2010), or the speech by the *Financial Times* chief economics commentator Martin Wolf in November 2008, ‘A time for humility’, <http://blogs.ft.com/economistsforum/2008/11/a-time-for-humility/> (accessed 3 March 2010).

5. See UN Population Division, <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp> (accessed 20 September 2009).

continents.<sup>6</sup> The number of poor may also be increasing.<sup>7</sup> Obtaining food is becoming precarious for more millions of people across the globe: the first Millennium Development Goal, the eradicating of extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, may be unattainable.<sup>8</sup> Water resources are becoming scarcer; nearly 900 million people have inadequate access to safe drinking water, while about 2.5 billion have inadequate access to water for sanitation and waste disposal.<sup>9</sup> The crises affect those worst off most adversely.

The net outcome of this confluence of crises is that conflicts, old and new, increase and intensify. They are exacerbated by several factors. One is that the peoples of the world are more tightly coupled in the sense that impacts from one country spread wider, faster and stronger than at any time before in human history. We learned from the present economic crisis that Asian and Latin American countries were not decoupled from the American or European economies or vice versa; rather, impacts cascaded and ricocheted around the world in less than eighty days. We have learned from AIDS, SARS and the H1N1 ('swine') flu virus that no country is an island to itself, and that viruses travel without passports. What happens to a country is increasingly decided outside its own borders. The fact that we live on one planet means that there are no safe havens. Wise responses depend on our understanding of how the world works and how it can be changed.

### Social science emerging from the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution

To a great extent, the social sciences grew out of the seventeenth-century European Enlightenment, when new ideas about religion, reason, humanity and society were merged into a fairly coherent worldview that stressed human rights, individualism and constitutionalism. Studies of alien societies were used as a contrast when analysing a country's institutions and customs. A range of new, fundamental conceptions was articulated, for example:

- about the autonomy of the individual and inviolable rights
- about individual freedom and the sovereignty of the people
- about the tripartition of state power and the independence of the state from religious supremacy
- about the unfairness of inherited privileges
- about the principles for organizing a market economy.

Equally basic to the birth of Modernity was the recognition that a plurality of opinions and an open, critical debate were necessary to gain new insights and for citizens to forge their own history. Education for all, including women, was articulated as a political goal. A free press and the dissemination of knowledge were regarded as a means for enlightenment and personal development. Power, it was argued, could only be legitimate if it promoted the welfare of the people. Even today, many of these issues remain contentious.

The development of social theory has accelerated in periods of rapid social change. For example, the Industrial Revolution was accompanied by an intellectual revolution: that is, a fundamental change in the thinking about how the economy works and what the guiding principles for economic policy should be. A key part of the analysis focused on the divergence between, on the one hand, the increase in the output and wealth of nations, and on the other, the effects of competition on the conditions of workers; that is, the impact of unfettered capitalism on social dislocation and the misery of labourers, including women and children. This story about the changing interrelationship between industrial production and social conditions is not history. It is an unfolding story of life on the globe, now called globalization, which signifies an ever more unfettered flow of goods, monies, peoples and ideas. Globalization has been justified and accelerated by social theories, but in turn, it challenges social sciences' current understanding of the continuing processes.<sup>10</sup>

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6. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2002), *World Population Ageing: 1950–2050*; <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/> <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/>
  7. 'World Bank poverty figures: what do they mean', <http://www.stwr.org/globalization/world-bank-poverty-figures-what-do-they-mean.html> (accessed 3 March 2010). In 2009, an estimated 55 million to 90 million more people will be living in extreme poverty than anticipated before the crisis. See [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/PR\\_Global\\_MDG09\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/PR_Global_MDG09_EN.pdf) (accessed 3 March 2010).
  8. According to FAO's *Hunger Report 2008*, another 40 million people have been pushed into hunger in 2008, bringing the overall number of undernourished people in the world to 963 million, compared with 923 million in 2007, <http://km.fao.org/fsn/news-events0/fsn-detail/en/news/8903/icode/> (accessed 3 March 2010).
  9. WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (2008), *Progress in Drinking-water and Sanitation: special focus on sanitation* (MDG Assessment Report 2008), p. 25; Updated Numbers: WHO-UNICEF JMP Report 2008.
  10. Three examples are Francis Fukuyama (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press; Samuel P. Huntington (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster; and Joseph E. Stiglitz (2002), *Globalization and its Discontents*, New York: Norton, each of which has generated extensive debate.

## Crises are not anticipated

The themes introduced above are not new, but are still topical. They have been addressed and analysed for two centuries; rethinking them today is, however, timely and pertinent. They concern all the social sciences, since not just national economies are changing, but also ethnic boundaries, institutional arrangements, cultural habits and individual mindsets. In other words, living on one planet integrated by advancing technologies, expanding exchange and real-time communication means a mismatch between globalization and governance; that is, between the reach and adversity of impacts and the range and ability of existing institutions to deal with them. Few people anticipated the present confluence of crises. The question is whether we did not see it coming because we used the wrong spectacles, or simply because we never looked properly, even after the first whistles were blown. There is also considerable professional disagreement on what is to be done, on effective remedies and the impacts these may have on what will happen in the near or distant future. Social scientists clash on many of these crucial questions.

## The state of the art: what should be the ambition?

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. This is a problem because we are increasingly made aware that while we live on one planet, we belong to worlds apart. And if the social sciences are not even on the same map, what should be done? Does a more integrated world require a more integrated social science?

Several attempts at Grand Theory have been challenged or have disintegrated: for example, Marxism, structural functionalism, also socio-biology and the neoclassical synthesis. Should we retain this (grand-theoretical) ambition? Is there one social science or many? Should we strive for what physicists call 'a theory of everything'? Can there be a single encompassing theory of all human behaviour? What is our situation now – what theories do we have to start with?

First of all, we have no single, generally accepted model of humanity.<sup>11</sup> We can draw on a wide range of such models, from the Freudian conception to 'administrative man',<sup>12</sup> and increasingly the less calculating, less predictable and partly irrational relatives of 'rational man'. As the faith in simple rational actor models has been shattered, a series of half-breeds has been developed, a whole bestiary of model actors with engaging stories about the properties they are supposed to embody. Some of the most interesting ones have been developed in cognitive psychology and behavioural economics.<sup>13</sup> Amartya Sen, for one, has advised us to set aside a one-dimensional approach to human identity, which results in the 'civilizational and religious partitioning of the world', and adopt a multiplex conception.<sup>14</sup> Is such a conception more appropriate in modern societies which function as mixing vessels for the reassortment of partial identities from different cultures and epochs?

Not only have the social sciences produced a wide range of 'humanoids' – that is, theoretical constructs that are our lookalikes – there is also a wide range of mechanisms at our disposal. These mechanisms range from self-fulfilling prophecies to prisoners' dilemmas, from cobweb models to selection models, all useful for interpreting and explicating different actual situations or events. Should our goal be to identify such mechanisms, explicate their logic and then eclectically use and combine them to explain why different social processes unfold as they do? Should our goal, as Robert Merton had it, be 'theories of the middle range'<sup>15</sup> rather than Grand Theory? Or, as James S. Coleman argued, should we search for 'sometimes true theories'<sup>16</sup> that are useful for interpreting and illuminating different specific phenomena, rather than strive for a Theory of Everything? In general, these and other issues and questions press on social science.

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11. The term was coined by Herbert Simon (1957) *Models of Man, Social and Rational: Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in a Social Setting*, New York: Wiley.

12. The term 'administrative man' is also associated with Herbert Simon and his modifications of the classical model or 'rational man', characterized by bounded rationality and 'satisficing'.

13. Among the themes of behavioural economics is the use of rules of thumb, heuristics and cognitive bias rather than rational decisions, the framing of problems, which affects decision making and market inefficiencies. For a popular introduction to some of the topics, see Dan Ariely (2008) *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*, New York: Harper Collins.

14. Amartya Sen (2006) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, New York: W. W. Norton.

15. Robert K. Merton (1968) 'On the sociological theories of the middle range', in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, enlarged edition, New York: Free Press.

16. James S. Coleman (1964) *Introduction to Mathematical Sociology*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.

## The task: simultaneously addressing the state of the world and the state of the art

What is the moral to be drawn from the state of our art? I would advocate not so much interdisciplinary research as cross-disciplinary or even integrated research: that is, research that in its very design, execution, application and presentation brings together the humanities and the natural and social sciences in joint research projects.

Climate change, and managing disasters and catastrophes, are examples of topics requiring such integrated research. Climate change is the unfolding of the forces of nature triggered by human action. We cannot change the way the forces of nature work, but we can change the ways humans act. This is why integrated research is critical for the destiny of our planet afflicted by climate change: identifying its social causes and mapping its human impacts, calculating costs and advising policies – all well within the purview of social science. Social science must help measure, assess, negotiate and organize, and in the process, help preserve human diversity and culture. The message of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is that the planet itself may be imperilled: that is, that the forces that have been unleashed through energy use or pollution, if not addressed immediately, intelligently and forcefully, may cause irreversible damage to our common global environment.

When I say ‘immediately, intelligently and forcefully’, I am no longer talking about natural phenomena but about human responses, about social science knowledge and about evidence-based policy making. More than that: it is a plea for integrated research where the humanities and the natural and social sciences jointly address natural phenomena, social processes, institutional design, cultural interpretations, ethical norms and mindsets.

We have to address simultaneously the state of the world and the state of the art, the course of events and our capacity to analyse and cope with them. In order to make social science relevant, pertinent and potent, we as social scientists have to scrutinize our concepts about how society works, and engage in vigorous self-examination of how our approaches fare in order to define common tasks and set a shared agenda. Societies and behaviours are forever changing – partly as a consequence of the models and interpretations of social scientists.

Hence, striving for the likeness of a theory of mechanics or the chemistry of natural phenomena unaffected by how we analyse them would be in vain. However, we can be optimistic with respect to the role that the social sciences can and must play in addressing the state of the world and the confluence of global crises that we face, even if we have to relinquish the ambition of finding an all-encompassing global theory of social behaviour and development.

Indeed, a token of the optimism is this 2010 *World Social Science Report* which UNESCO entrusted the International Social Science Council to produce. The ISSC is grateful for this challenge and the opportunity it provided for continued close collaboration with UNESCO.



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