

On Improving Social Sciences Education in Pakistan*

By Asad Zaman

Introduction

Many authors have lamented the state of social sciences in Pakistan (e.g. Nadeem-ul-Haque (2007) or Inayatullah *et. al.* (2005)). The HEC has also taken note of the lack of significant research, shortage of suitably trained faculty, and created a Committee for Development of Social Sciences and Humanities to find remedies. However, before rushing to solutions, I believe we must take time out for an accurate diagnosis. It has happened all too often that impatient activists have not taken out sufficient time to pause for diagnosis, and have ended up administering the wrong medicine in their haste.

Why is the state of social sciences going from bad to worse in Pakistan? A simple answer, often given, is that there is no money in it. The argument goes as follows: our best and brightest students traditionally chose to study Engineering and Medicine, because these professions offered the best prospects. When MBA's and Computer Sciences started to pay, degrees in these areas also became popular. When Social Scientists start earning well, we will get more enrollments and attract better faculty, and generally improve the state of affairs. Those with market-oriented views, especially popular among economists, believe that market prices are socially optimal. That is, low wages for social science means that social sciences are not very valuable or productive for society. If this is so, then there is no problem to fix. We should not invest resources in areas that are not very productive or valuable. Several prominent educationists have expressed the sentiment that developing countries cannot afford to waste resources on philosophy, literature or soft sciences – these luxuries can only be afforded by the rich. We must concentrate on science, technology, infrastructure etc. as the route to riches.

This diagnosis suggests that we treat the problem with benign neglect. This is not only naïve, but dangerously wrong. In fact, the poor health of the social sciences is an extremely serious problem, solving it is a high priority issue, and our approach to the solution will significantly impact the future of Pakistan. At the same time, the problem is complex and multi-dimensional, and solutions will require coordinated efforts on several fronts to succeed. In *Education in*

Pakistan, Qureshi (1975) described the historical process, which led to rote-learning, and a meaningless education system aimed only at getting jobs, rather than advancing learning and creating the thrill of advancing the frontiers of knowledge. In this short article, it is not possible for me to discuss all of these various dimensions. Instead I focus on just one aspect, namely the extent to which we should borrow from Western social sciences to improve the state of affairs in Pakistan.

Western Universalism

During the historical phase called ‘the Enlightenment’ of the West, the idea that all societies follow the same trajectory was born. The West was the most advanced and developed of all societies. Other societies were primitive and under-developed. As these other societies matured and grew, they would follow the same stages that were followed by the West, and eventually become like modern Western societies. Early thinkers like Comte (1855), and more recent ones like Rostow (1978), described the stages in growth from primitive society to modern ones in a ‘logical’ sequence. This set of ideas is called “Western Universalism.” The term ‘developing country,’ which has replaced ‘under-developed country’ also reflects this idea; see Wallerstein (2006).

Social science is the study of human experience. It attempts to find patterns displayed, and commonalities in human interactions in small and large groups. The idea of Western universalism suggests that the Western experience is relevant for all of humanity – any patterns and commonalities of European history will eventually be found in all societies as they develop. In this case, even though social science developed in the West, it can be universally applied to all societies.

Substantial evidence has emerged that Western Universalism is wrong. All cultures are not essentially the same as primitive Western cultures, nor do they all follow the same development trajectories. The attempt to fit all societies onto the European pattern leads to clearly recognizable biases known as “Eurocentricism.” Many aspects of the European experience are unique to Europe and were not (and likely will not be) experienced by other societies (and vice-versa). Insights of social science based on these particular European experiences are peculiar to the West and cannot be generalized to other societies. Many authors have documented problems and errors resulting from Eurocentricism; see for example, Hodgson and Burke (1993), or Marglin (2007). Mitchell (2002, p. 7) writes that “The possibility of social science is based upon taking certain historical experiences of the West as the template for a universal knowledge.” This means that social science as developed in the West is Western Social Science, and we

cannot safely borrow insights from the West to apply to our society, which has an entirely different history, and entirely different set of potential future trajectories.

There are many peculiarities and quirks of European history that have impacted on the development of social science in the West. I focus on some of the important divergences below. My goal is not to provide a deep analysis of the Western experience, but merely to establish that it differs significantly from ours. To the extent that this experience impacts on Western formulation of social science, we cannot profitably learn from it, and must formulate an understanding of history based on our own experiences.

Western Transition to Secular Thought

Violent religious conflict, and disenchantment of key intellectuals with religion led to the emergence of secular thought in Europe. A brief history is given in Pannenberg (1996), while McGee (1948) gives a detailed history for Britain. Instead of religious principles, society was to be organized using reason and factual knowledge. One problem that immediately emerged was that values could not be derived from facts and logic, as Hume recognized early. At the same time, rules and regulations were essential for a society to function. There were many attempts to find a secular basis for morals; for example *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Adam Smith, and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* by David Hume. Among many approaches, a prominent solution was the “social contract,” a set of rules which all members of a society agreed to live by (though this agreement was not formal and explicit, and the rules were also not written down or even clearly articulated). The ‘rule of law’ and a state empowered to enforce the law became the substitute for morality as given by religious rules. Current European political thought is firmly based on the social contract.

There are two major weaknesses of social contract theories. One is that there is no absolute basis for morality. Whatever the society agrees as the social contract becomes moral. Premarital or extra-marital sex, pedophilia, slavery, bull-fighting, boxing, putting out contracts for assassination, torture, etc. may all be considered moral or immoral according to majority vote. The second weakness is that there is no inner compulsion on anyone to follow the rules. Unlike the moral code, which is binding on individuals by God, and must be followed regardless of whether or not someone is watching, the social contract is to be enforced by the law, the courts and the government. The realization that the social contract is all that stands between a civilized and human society and reversion to barbarism – one cannot assume any standards for human moral conduct mandated by religion – led to greater respect for artificial, variable, incomplete and often incorrect rules embodied in the code of law. The establishment of the ‘rule of law’ in European

states did provide a secular basis for regulating states and was a tremendous achievement. However the weaknesses of the social contract can be illustrated by noting that in the Western judicial system, justice is an incidental byproduct of a mediated struggle between opposing interests. An excellent discussion of the ethical issues is given by a panel of lawyers in “A Case of Competing Loyalties” in *Stanford Magazine* Fall 1983 (p38-43). All lawyers on the panel agreed that a lawyer defending a male client known to him or her to be guilty of rape, nonetheless had the responsibility to destroy the reputation of the female victim if this was the best possible defense. All agreed that the Western criminal defense system was an adversarial process with artificial boundaries, and not a pure search for truth.

Emergence of Social Sciences in the West

Manicas (1989) and Gordon (1991) have both written books on different aspects of the history and philosophy of social sciences. These provide substantial details on European history and how it has influenced the emergence of social sciences. One aspect of this history is Newton’s discovery of gravitation, which was universally admired. Many attempts were made to follow his methodology of using one law (or an economical set of principles) to explain a large and diverse set of phenomena. Economics came closest to this goal in setting up selfishness as the single motive which drives humans, and using this to explain all economic phenomena. Mirowski (1989) has written on how economics was self-consciously modeled on physics. Recent investigations of behavioral economics show that this simplification of human behavior is too extreme, and fails to adequately explain many phenomena; see, for example, Camerer (2003) or Kagel and Roth (1995). Attachment to the mathematical methodology has led to increasing formalism and decreasing relevance in modern economic theory. Blaug (1998) cites a leading editor of an economic journal, who stated that “.. few economists ask themselves what are the crucial economic problems facing society.” In political science, historical and qualitative approaches which recognize the complexity of human behavior have been marginalized. The dominant approaches use mathematical approaches based on ‘rational actor’ models and threatens the earlier classical approach with extinction. In recent dialogue and controversy, documented in *Perestroika* by Monroe (2005), political scientists have pleaded for a live and let live approach, to allow both traditions to survive. Slavish imitation of Western methodology would lead us to reduce humans to selfish automata, and would reduce our understanding of human behavior instead of being illuminating about our society.

Western disenchantment with religion led them to develop a theory of knowledge based solely on facts and reason – this has been labeled ‘empiricism’ or ‘positivism.’ Superficially, this seems like a very attractive proposition; what else is there, apart from facts and reason, on which to base knowledge? Deeper exploration, carried out in the West, leads to several difficulties. One difficulty is that values or social norms cannot be derived from facts and logic. On the other hand, conduct of social policy requires such norms, to differentiate between the good and the bad and to conduct policy to achieve the good and avoid the bad. Efforts of social scientists to be “scientific” have led to hidden moral values which permeate Western formulations and frameworks for social science. These implicit and unexplored background values are often in conflict with traditional values in Pakistan. Foucault’s views on this problem have been articulated as follows: “modern human sciences (biological, psychological, social) purport to offer universal scientific truths about human nature that are, in fact, often mere expressions of ethical and political commitments of a particular society. For a specific example, values implicit in the apparently sterile mathematical and value-neutral framework of economics have been exposed in Nelson (2001), Wilber (2003) and Blaug (1998). In Pakistan we can avoid this confusion and conflict, and base social science directly on openly acknowledged and commonly agreed upon Islamic values. But to do this would require formulating social sciences in a way different from that of Europe.

Demarcation of social sciences into different fields and setting up of boundaries between different fields was also the outcome of particular historical processes in the West. Manicas (1989) has given details of competing traditions, and how accidents of history led to the dominance of one school of thought over others. He has also suggested that as a whole, the ‘wrong’ set of ideas have gained prominence in the social sciences, and major difficulties in understanding the world and human interactions have emerged as a result. Many have echoed his call. As a simple illustration, consider the field demarcation between psychology and economics. Economists refuse to consider the issue of how wealth and material goods affect the sense of satisfaction, well-being, contentment or happiness that people experience, on the ground that these questions belong to the realm of psychology. They consider it as part of their profession to only consider how people can become wealthy. Recent inter-disciplinary investigations have revealed that attitudes towards wealth, methods by which it is acquired, as well as interpersonal dispositions, can play an extremely important role in determining the satisfaction obtained by pursuit of wealth. Lane (2001) and Layard (2005) have documented how vast increases in wealth in Western societies have failed to increase contentment, satisfaction and sense of well-being. This has extremely

serious consequences for economics – if the determined effort being made to increase GNP and wealth has detrimental consequences for human welfare, then what is the point of it all? At the very least, economists must pay attention to these issues, to ensure that the pursuit of wealth has a point in terms of increasing human satisfaction. Recently, the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences (Wallerstein 1996) reported on the need to change the methodology, approach and field boundaries in Western social sciences. It made specific recommendations for different fields based on a detailed analysis.

This situation creates an opportunity for us. There is substantial inertia in Western academia that ties them to conventional approaches. Since we have no investment in past approaches, we are free to “leapfrog” (like the Japanese did in the steel industry) and adopt new approaches to the subject matter. Blaug (1998) has written about the dominance of overly mathematical and irrelevant research produced by economists in USA and Europe, and how moving back towards relevance is difficult because of institutional structures that promote such research.

The Fragmentation of Knowledge in the West

A major problem that affects social sciences acutely is the ‘fragmentation of knowledge.’ This has some relation to the previous issue discussed – artificial discipline boundaries prevent the synthesis of useful information because different pieces lie in different disciplines. Vartan Gregorian (1993), the president of Brown University, discusses many of the problems created by this fragmentation:

specialization, instead of uniting human beings into a general community of values and discourse, has by necessity divided them into small and exclusive coteries, narrow in outlook and interest. It isolates and alienates human beings. Social relations, as a result, cease to be the expression of common perceptions and common beliefs; they are reduced to political relations, to the interplay of competitive, and often antagonistic, groups. Specialized education makes our students into instruments to serve the specialized needs of a society of specialists.

It is generally thought that the fragmentation of knowledge has been caused by the explosion in the quantity of knowledge. There is so much knowledge that no one can know all of it and hence unify it. This is a misconception. From the earliest times, specializations in medicine, architecture, agriculture, philosophy, etc. have been known and recognized as necessities. The presence of an occasional exceptional individual who could know it all (or have broad spectrum knowledge) is neither necessary nor sufficient for the unity of knowledge.

In fact, knowledge is unified by purpose. Having a sense of the broad outlines of human endeavor, and how it serves the human race, one can have an idea of how his/her efforts fit into this big picture. Current conceptions of science militate against this unity. Economists claim their discipline is “positive.” As scientists, they can only assess and explain the factual consequences that will result from different types of economic policies. Judging which policy is better or worse is a normative act, which should be left to policy makers. This type of insulation and fragmentation (which has nothing to do with the explosion of information) has disastrous consequences. If policies enrich a few and impoverish many, or damage the environment and profit the multinationals, or lead to debt and starvation in poor African countries, the economist has nothing to say about it in his status as a scientific economist. The physicist who works round the clock to produce an atom bomb claims that he is not responsible for how it is used. A biologist has discovered high yield varieties of rice, which could feed the whole world. However, distribution, publicity, pushing for policies for adoption etc. are not within his specialty. Instead, if a multinational hires him for developing a variety that is not fertile (so that it will be able to sell new seeds every season), he will do the work for a salary, and not ask whether this development will be harmful to the interests of humanity as a whole.

With increasing secularism, and the basing of knowledge on facts and reason alone, norms and values came to be regarded as unscientific. The glue of the common purpose of service of humankind binds the strands of knowledge together. The idea that life arose by an accident and will perish in another accident denies all purpose to human existence and dissolves this glue, leading to the fragmentation of knowledge. Bertrand Russell (1903), a leading philosopher and architect of dominant modern worldviews has expressed himself poetically on this issue as follows:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins -- all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm

foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

Abandonment of Mission of Character Building

Reuben (1996) writes, "Late nineteenth century colleges had the explicit goal to build character and promote morality (understanding of duties to family, community, country and God) while at the same time contributing to the advancement of knowledge. These two goals proved to be incompatible." In a historical process traced by Reuben, universities tried many different methods for character building before finally abandoning the goal and turning purely to the pursuit of knowledge. This historical study of development and evolution of Universities in the USA is an illuminating book, which contains many useful lessons for structuring higher education in Pakistan.

Religious organizations were responsible for founding and funding the vast majority of colleges in the USA. Sectarian promotion policies were seen to lead to loss of academic excellence, and slowly abandoned in favor of tolerance. This policy of tolerance created a dilemma for promotion of morality. With faculty of differing religious views, character building and morality could not be promoted on the basis of a common religious platform. Instead, morality was bound to the "scientific method," on the basis of the perception that: "teachers who did research would impart their enthusiasm to students. In addition, they would also impart the scientific values of unbiased observation, openness, tolerance, sincerity and commitment to students." Efforts were made to find scientific bases for religion and morality. Natural theology, apologetics, scientific justifications for moral principles, and many other intellectual endeavors were part of this movement. At the same time, the recognition that science was supposedly value free led the social sciences to increasingly distance themselves from values and norms. Instead of passionate advocacy of measures to promote human welfare, social sciences moved towards analytical, descriptive and detached observation. This move undercut efforts to base morality on science, and ultimately, after many efforts in different directions, the whole effort was abandoned in USA universities.

Loss of the high moral purpose of universities has been sensed and regretted by many commentators. Many alternatives have been proposed and tried but none has proven successful. Thus students can learn how to manufacture atom bombs in modern universities, but not a word about the morality of killing and torture. The grave consequences of this have been graphically depicted in Glover (2001) in the form of countless atrocities committed in a world which has lost its moral bearings. Finding a solid basis for instilling morals in the coming

generations is an urgent need, but it seems impossible in the Western context. Here in Pakistan, we have agreement on a religion, and therefore the same target is much easier to achieve. However, in imitating the Western educational system, we lose the possibility of doing so.

Lessons for Social Science Education in Pakistan

The main thrust of this essay has been to point out deficiencies in the Western Social Sciences, and suggest that blind imitation is not the route to improving social science education in Pakistan. Instead of advancing the discussion, this actually takes us back one step; we deny the efficacy of one simple, concrete, and often recommended plan of action, without having proposed any replacement. Improving social sciences in Pakistan would be a lot easier if it was just matter of sending enough students to the West to get their doctorates and then hiring them in local universities as teachers. This type of strategy has not worked fine in the Physical Sciences, not to speak of Social Sciences, for reasons already discussed.

What then is the alternative? It is well known that imitating an existing technology is substantially easier than inventing a new one. Our discussion suggests that despite its difficulty, that is what is needed. Borrowing frames, concepts, analytical techniques, etc. from Western social sciences runs serious risks of imposing alien views on local problems. For example, the Marxist concept of conflicts between capitalists and laborers are deeply grounded in Marx's observations of industrializing England, and attempts to impose these categories into the Pakistani context do violence to the ground realities of Pakistani society. Class struggles here occur along entirely different lines. Examples of this type could be multiplied. Our basic suggestion is to dispense entirely with the Western categories and concepts, and look at our own society, find our own prioritization for the problems we face, and find our own solutions. In the process of solving real problems facing Pakistani society, we will automatically create a body of knowledge that we could label "social science." This may well have categories of overlap and similarity with Western social sciences, but will also have its points of difference and singularities. Creation of a new set of sciences from scratch is a mammoth task, and daunted by this, many authors who came close to realizing the necessity of this backed away from grasping the full implications of their own analyses. Writings which debate these issues fall within the broad category of the project of "Islamization of Knowledge" – see for example Al-Attas (1978) and Al-Faruqi (1982) – widely considered to be an important current need of Muslims.

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After having stated the main issue in a stark and blunt form, I would like to add some refinements and qualifications. Serious intellectual endeavor requires a substantial amount of discipline and training. Lest there be doubt, let me state that I am a great admirer of the intellectual traditions of the West. Training our scholars in Western social sciences would be a valuable investment, as it would provide them with experience in rigorous analysis and structured argumentation. While much of the substance of Western social sciences is derived from Western experiences and hence cannot be imported, the form of the analysis, the logical rigor and empirical orientation, are very much worth emulating. There is a lot we could learn from post-Modernism, which develops an internal Western critique of much of Western social science. Our colleagues in India have done a lot of work on developing ‘subaltern studies,’ and many other disciplines where they have challenged Eurocentric views and developed and presented their own alternatives. Most importantly, we have our own tradition of Islamic scholarship, which has unsurpassed depth and complexity. Although it has been somnolent in the recent past, there are many signs of its revival. Extending and adapting this intellectual tradition to cope with modern problems would provide a methodology rooted in our own history, with a much better chance to flourish than alien implants. Just as our Islamic tradition has in the past been able to creatively borrow and adapt materials from Greeks, Indian, and many other intellectual corpora, there is no reason that we cannot absorb and assimilate relevant Western insights. In closing, I would note that I have focused almost exclusively on one particular problem, the extent to which we may borrow from Western social sciences, in developing social sciences in Pakistan. A large number of other relevant issues have been ignored. Qureshi (1975) has given an excellent analysis of many of the dimensions of the problem at book length and suggested solutions. Even though the book is old, the problems discussed remain pretty much as described. It is sad that despite its crucial importance to the future of the nation, no real progress has been made towards solving these problems in decades.

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