



## Understanding Social Change

*Social Sciences - what are they?*

### David Goldblatt

Hello, I'm David Goldblatt and with me to discuss something about what exactly are the social sciences I have Doreen Massey, Professor of Geography at the Open University, and I have David Held, Professor of Politics and Sociology at the Open University.

### David Held

Thanks for inviting me.

### David Goldblatt

David, I wanted to start with you on a kind of personal note. Our students are right at the beginning of their careers as social scientists. I want to ask you – why did you become a social scientist?

### David Held

I was brought up in a Jewish family in North London, a secular Jewish family, but one where to be a boy and to be a man was something that was highly privileged, and I can remember many, many dinner conversations all over the week and weekends in which my father would sit at the end of the table and talk to me, and as he talked to me I could see my sisters, and I had three of them, become more and more uncomfortable – why was it that he wasn't talking to them? Why was it the conversation wasn't addressed to them? And even my mother had to wonder why it was that when my father came home from work he told me what would have happened to him during the day. So these sorts of issues began to feel to me to be issues one needed to think about. The pattern of the world wasn't simply given, relationships were shaped. Why were they shaped the way they were? Why was it that I as a young boy was being privileged over and above my sisters? I did feel guilty about that, I always felt uncomfortable about it, but I always wanted to know what the social bases of these sorts of patterns, and that particular enquiry led me to worry about this question and to think about it in all sorts of different social contexts.

### David Goldblatt

Doreen, what kind of questions brought you to the social sciences?

### Doreen Massey

I remember really very, very young sitting in bed for hours looking at atlases and trying to think well, it's ten o'clock at night now, what will it be in this place, what time will it be, what season will it be, how will these people be being at this precise moment on the other side of the world? There were one or two places I used to go to particularly and just try and imagine what was going on at exactly the same time, but in another place and another society, and that just started captivating me about the differences between societies and why those differences existed. And I guess there was a more local dimension too which related more clearly to the issues of inequality that David raised, and that is that I was very definitely, and brought up to be very self-consciously, a northerner, and you know what Manchester thinks today, London thinks tomorrow, and all those were the nostrums that I was brought up with, and so I was from very early days aware of regional inequality and regional differences, particularly I guess around issues of class, and wanting to understand more about that, and a certain degree of just resentment, wanting to know why and wanting actually in the end to do something about it.

**David Goldblatt**

From what both of you say it seems there are quite a lot of different dimensions to the social sciences, it's about rigorous thinking, about thinking about structures; in your case Doreen, that having a kind of imagination, to imagine yourself in the place of the other. I wonder if you could pin down for us in a kind of pithy manner what exactly you think the social sciences are.

**Doreen Massey**

Well we could go on for a long time about that, but I mean let's start from something that you hinted at there which I think is very important and that is that they are specialised systematic forms of knowledge. It's not, it is more than and different from what we might call common sense, so they are social sciences and perhaps we could return to that later. What they investigate in a sense is how human beings operate as social animals. What social sciences do is enquire into the nature of that thing we call society, how society is organised, how it can vary between groups, the kind of way in which I was talking about it earlier, how society changes over time and why it changes, and also what may be the affects of different forms of organisation of society, different forms of inequality, the ways in which individuals are in one way or another cajoled or enforced to behave in particular ways, what is the relationship between individual freedom or agency, and the quite evident controls that society places around them. All those questions are things to which social science applies its skills.

**David Goldblatt**

David, Doreen has described the social sciences in part in terms of their content, the kinds of things it looks at, the kinds of questions it asks – can you characterise the social sciences in terms of the way of thinking as a social scientist – are there any kind of rules or models you can suggest in that area?

**David Held**

If I were starting and thinking about social sciences today as a student, there are a few very simple rules which you hinted at which I think can get you a long, long way. These rules define the social sciences, but to some extent negatively, but they're terribly helpful, and they go like this. There are a number of social science don'ts. They're fundamental. There are four of them.

One is don't over-generalise about the social world on the basis of your own personal experience. I mean we all grow up in particular communities and particular regions, in particular countries, in particular super-national regions like the EU and so on and so forth, but we can all readily think that our experience of the world at this particular moment in time is the way things always have been. It's a mistake. So number one, don't over-generalise with your own personal experiences.

Number two, linked to what I've just said is another worry, don't over-generalise from the present. We can so readily think that our particular views, as shaped in the here and now, create a particular conception of the world, a particular conception of politics, which has been omnipresent, which has been with us all the time. It's a mistake. Don't over-generalise from the present. Different historical time periods have thrown up different sorts of issues, different sorts of problems, and the more one has attended to those, the more you understand the extraordinary richness of human life, and the variation of different kinds of societies.

There's a third don't, and that is already hinted at as well. Don't over-generalise an experience of one country. What we think as Brits, or what we think as citizens of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland or whatever is very different, let's say, from standard ways of thinking about politics in Spain, Portugal, Italy, India, China, and within some of those huge countries, of course it's different across those huge countries as well. So, don't over-generalise an experience of one country. Always ask yourself the question, you know, how would this set of events be understood and interpreted in a different place, and once you understand the difference you understand something about the particularity of your own point of view.

And finally I would say it's also important not to run together descriptive and analytical statements about the world with normative or evaluative statements, it's better to say we

might all deplore violent crime but deploring violent crime isn't going to help us understand what it is, how it's patterned, how it's shaped, and how we can comprehend it, so we must learn to separate out statements that are descriptive and analytical from statements which are simply judgemental and evaluative.

So these four don'ts – don't over-general from your own personal experience, don't over-generalise from the present period of time, don't over-generalise from the experience of one country, and as best you can keep descriptive and evaluative statements separate.

**Doreen Massey**

I think one thing that comes out of what David said is that social sciences are both something which we know and something which we do. I mean we know something called social science in the sense that there is a long inheritance, a long history that we have at our disposal of people who have done this kind of work before, and we come to the doing of social science with that history and those kinds of understandings, but at the same time social science is very much something which we practice, it's an activity that takes place in the world, and it constantly develops, it constantly develops in part because of the changes within society itself, but also because a lot of us, as we've all hinted at already, a lot of us are in this trade because we want to intervene in one way or another. We don't just want to study society, we would also, even if it doesn't come directly into every study we do, we would also like to make a difference.