



Understanding Social Change

Development of the social sciences

David Goldblatt

I want to come back to that difference and that process of intervention and engagement later on in our conversation. I want to first think about this long tradition that you talk about, Doreen, and David if I can ask you, the social sciences – how long have they been around, have they always been with us, I mean people have surely reflected on the nature of the societies in which they lived for a very long time – when did something called the social sciences actually appear?

David Held

I think you're absolutely right to say that people have always thought about what the world is like around them, they've always thought to interpret the world, always thought to make sense of it, and in their diverse belief systems they've done it in radically different sorts of ways. However, it seems to me that the systematic study of the social sciences, the systematic study of human behaviour in society is a relatively recent phenomena. Now what is relatively recent mean? Relatively recent for me means from the late 17th and early 18th century onwards, that is the study of human society as phenomena of the rise of the modern world. Why is that? It's because prior to the rise of the modern world – and I'll explain what I mean by that in a minute – people tended to live in circumstances that were defined by tradition or religious beliefs. Traditional ways of thinking, one might summarise the point, these were shattered by a number of developments from the late 16th and 17th century onwards. I think of the consolidation of power in the hands of the state, the rise of market societies and spread of economic reasoning and economic transactions, the French Revolution later on of 1789, which fundamentally challenged traditional claims to power and authority, and threw out once and for all the claim of monarchs to divine right. No longer could monarchs rule by divine right, they had to justify their power before court, the court of citizens. And there was something else that was fundamental happening throughout this whole period, late 16th, 17th, 18th century onwards, and that's the rise of the Enlightenment. Now, I can hear you thinking, gosh, what is that, what is the Enlightenment, that sounds very complex. Well in essence the Enlightenment is simply this - it's for the first time people began to argue, at least in the West, that the way to understand the world was not through religious belief or traditional systems of understanding, but was the human reason and systematic enquiry – we've all talked about that already – the Enlightenment is a system of beliefs, was a way of defending the notion that the guiding principle for understanding the world shouldn't be religious but should be rather our own systematic attempts to comprehend the world as it is. Now, what this meant was that we as human beings could understand the world, and ought to understand the world free from superstition, prejudice, custom and habit. In other words, the Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Tom Paine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, understood the social science don'ts. They said don't understand the world as given by traditional religion, don't understand the world simply as handed down by superstition; we have to enquire and understand its shape and structure and how it's come down to pass. And this gave rise to some explosive, simple but new questions. If the world wasn't God-given, or given in the framework of monarchical authority, what was the nature of that world, how was it shaped as it was, why did it have the shape that it did, what was human nature if it wasn't simply God-given and prescribed, how will we get on this band of nature of human kind and human beings, what's the nature of society, and how do societies change? So the social sciences grew up attempting to come to the terms with the crisis of tradition, the crisis of authority which exploded onto the world with the rise of the modern, stayed the modern economy, the spread of Enlightenment thinking, and so on. And our world is very different from those traditional past worlds and good social science worries about why and tries to understand it.

David Goldblatt

Doreen, I wonder is there a danger that David's account of the social sciences and their origins contradicts one of those don'ts in the sense that the social sciences had clearly emerged in the West, in Western societies?

Doreen Massey

Yes, though I don't know whether it was just David Held's contradiction because your question was when did they emerge, when did the social sciences first come into being, and one could also of course ask the question where did they begin to happen, where were they developed? And it is true that the social sciences that we're talking about are very much a Western inheritance, they're an inheritance of really developments within Europe, and that is what David is discussing, and one of the things we must always bear in mind is that there are other ways of knowing things, other ways of understanding the world. Those countries, within which social sciences developed, the kind of developments of the Enlightenment that David was just talking about, were countries which had a very specific history. They're countries which from the 18th century onwards became heavily manufacturing countries which went through a very what we would think of as a classic industrial revolution, which had a class structure dominated by industrial capitalists and financiers, and a working class very often organised into trades unions and so forth. What has happened since is that the social sciences that were developed within that context have been exported, if you like, to countries which have very different histories.

David Goldblatt

And how have they survived in that process of transition from the West to the rest?

Doreen Massey

Well there's quite a lot of debate because the questions which arise in societies which are not like those Western European societies are very different questions. If the biggest chunk of your social structure is a mixture of people selling things on the streets, and people working on the land, then some of the things we consider to be the big questions of social science just don't matter. Or if the biggest owners of capital aren't people on the boards of major companies and trans-national corporations, and so forth, but are actually big landowners, then the questions again are different, the social problems which you wish to address are different. I have quite a few friends who are Latin-American social scientists and there's no way in which they want simply to overthrow everything that we think of as social science, but they do quite seriously ask themselves the question, what would social sciences look like if we hadn't imported the ones from Paris and from London, and those developments that were going on in the 19th century, and still do today in the 20th century they import what we think now – what would social sciences look like if we kind of started from here and asked questions that are being posed within a Latin-American context. Take an issue which comes up very strongly, the issue of globalisation. The kinds of questions which occur to you as significant about globalisation are very different if you're located in the United States of America and you're seeing capital flee over the border to Mexico, or here in Europe where we're getting together as the European Union, or if you're in a country like Mali or Chad, or Angola, or Mozambique in Africa where you have the IMF coming round every now and then with a bunch of rules and things that you must do. So the experience of globalisation is very different, the questions that get posed are very different, and therefore some of the content is very different. That is absolutely not to say that there isn't the same requirement to have rigour in the answering of those questions.