



Understanding Social Change

Complementary approaches

David Goldblatt

It seems that we've talked about the social side of the social sciences; we haven't talked much about the idea that they're sciences, that there is a particular way, a method of studying, of delivering these kinds of rigorous arguments. David, why are the social sciences sciences – how did that come about?

David Held

Well for most of the 18th and 19th century I think it's fair to say that social scientific thinkers sought to develop their disciplines on the basis of a very particular conception of the natural sciences. So the key, the catch was, systematic observation, systematic method, disclosing the laws governing society, just as there were laws governing the physical world, and then armed with that knowledge people can make predictions and hence possibly control the way in a way analogous took control in the natural sciences. But over time, however, certain problems developed with this particular conception of understanding the social world, and it's this. It was very readily apparent that to understand a physical object is not the same thing as understanding a human being. To observe a physical event isn't the same thing as grasping what it is that a person does when a person acts in a certain sort of way. Now why is this? Simple question - why? Above all, it's because human beings, unlike objects and nature, unlike trees, let's say, or particles of various kinds, human beings are self-understanding, they have concepts, they have ideas, they have languages, they have meaning, they have culture, and the way they use all that determines what it is partly that they do, what it is that they understand what they do. Let me give you one very simple example: a traffic accident. Someone is killed in a road accident. Is it an accident, is it murder, is it suicide? Now if you are a natural scientist standing back in the world observing this happen, you might say well, large object hits person, road death. But that doesn't help us a jot begin to understand the intentionality of those people involved in pursuing the course of action that they pursued, and then we'll have to ask all sorts of other questions: when this person crossed the road what was in their mind, are there any notes about the nature of the activity, did they leave a suicide note or something like that? In other words to get to grips with what that actions means, you need to understand more than simply a neutral observation language, you need to understand something about the actor's own meanings, interpretations and accounts. Now all this is extremely complex, but what it is to say is to systematically pursue the social sciences you need more than simply the rigour of observation and analysis, you need to also understand the social meaning of action, and to understand thereby the context of action.

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Doreen, David seems to be arguing that the social sciences are not sciences in the sense that the natural sciences are, there's something about the subject matter of the social sciences that marks them out. Is that an account that you would feel is reflected in your own work as a geographer and in the discipline of geography more widely?

Doreen Massey

I think one thing one would say is that this question of the boundary between and the distinction between the natural and social sciences is one that's hotly disputed, it's up for grabs at the moment, but I think that the points that David made are very significant. There's no doubt about it that the fact that you're looking at a society which, in a sense, thinks about itself is an absolutely key characteristic of the social sciences, and we must remember that. One of the things that are fascinating about being a geographer is of course that at its widest, geography includes both bits of the natural sciences and certain aspects of the social sciences. As a natural scientist a geographer may look at land forms, at the courses of rivers,

at climate, at aspects of geology. As a human geographer, as we get called, we look at more social questions, questions of regional inequality, of cities, and so forth. And there have been over the year's considerable difficulties, it is absolutely true in us talking across that boundary, I think right now, at the turn of the Millennium some of the biggest questions that we're facing can only be seriously addressed by really trying to think across that huge boundary between the natural and the social. In issues of global warming, and of climate change, some of the massive environmental problems that we're facing at the moment can only really be tackled, understood, if we bring together causes which are social, and causes which are natural, questions of the way in which we live, and questions of the laws of nature, as they get called. And so somehow or other we cannot just see ourselves in, within the social sciences, we have to reach out and talk, and one of the most exciting things that's happening at the moment, I think, is that having had what, a good hundred years or so, of disciplines which really very carefully patrolled their borders and said you don't do that here because this is a geography discipline and it's not space in it, so you go and do it somewhere else, things like that; what's happening now I think is that some of the most exciting developments are coming when people talk to each other, as we're doing here, across the boundaries of disciplines, or try and get together in inter-disciplinary teams.