

The idea of a unified social science - from Marx and Weber to Wallerstein.

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Introduction

The social sciences are in no good shape in western society today. They seem to dwell in a state of disregard - after the hey-day of the 70's, when social science was a respected and popular occupation. It was considered indispensable in a vivid and enlightened democracy as a contributor to the understanding of society. And the social sciences were expected to offer solutions to the problems of society too.

In the last 10 to 15 years the social sciences have shown a marked tendency to withdraw, to separate and specialize, to compartmentalize knowledge of society. Whether this is a reason why there is crisis and decay in social science, or simply a reaction to crisis, is not quite clear. But certainly the confusion and lack of orientation is reinforced by individuals or groups of scholars within the social sciences, when they seek shelter in a little specialized corner of their own, neglecting the great questions of society. Occupation with "grand theories" and with fundamental processes of change in society as a whole is left to outsiders and marginalized in the academic world. The students of today will not oppose the trend very strongly, since they are influenced by the same societal forces as their teachers: notably the fight for getting and keeping a job and a position in society.

One important aspect of this change in scientific climate is the revival of sharper boundaries between the established disciplines of the social sciences. I would not postulate this as a uniform process, since crisis and confusion also lead to a great deal of looking around for new ideas and new ways to go.

At Roskilde University Center the revival of disciplines and narrow, specialized compartments has been felt strongly - contrary to a strong interdisciplinary activity and discussion established in the 70s. History has become almost what it was in good old days: a way of telling about the past without much method and theoretical guidelines. It clearly now again belongs much more to the humanities than to the social sciences. Economics too, often presents itself as a discipline in the good old

sense, making universal statements about a pretended independent economic segment of social reality.

This creates troubles for the broadly designed *social science basic education* (SAM-BAS) at RUC, which constitutes the first two years of a 5 years Master degree. Without a broad and truly interdisciplinary tradition of social science, this fruitful innovation does not have a solid foundation.

To turn the tide and help to give research and reflection about human society a new vitality, implies for me to contest the trend towards segregation of scientific disciplines (even if the trend is "multidisciplinary", i.e. trying to let the independent disciplines with their own "social laws" and methods come together and supplement each other). My motivation for writing this essay is to support old and new contributions towards interdisciplinary studies of society, and to look for fruitful steps towards a unidisciplinary social science.

At this point I think some old intellectual fighters could still help us very much. The competition between disciplines and unidisciplinary social science started well over a hundred years ago in the time of Karl Marx and Max Weber. It was the formation period of modern capitalist society, as well as the formation period of modern social science. Most of the disciplines concerned with human society, which today are well established, can trace their origins back to the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Weber is considered one of the founding fathers of sociology, and Marx is mainly treated as an economist. But these labels are highly artificial, indeed an outcome of the projection of disciplinary divisions back where they do not belong.

The two men had much in common. They tried to grasp the inner logic and structures of the emerging modern societies, both of them tried to conceptualize what happens in society as a whole, and they were very much aware of the processes of historical societal change. They represented holism versus fragmentalization, and dynamism versus static views. Consequently they were economists as well as political scientists, sociologists as well as historians - or none of it, because it is the language of professionalized disciplines, which are contrary to their intentions.

Did Marx and Weber share a vision or a program of interdisciplinary or unidisciplinary social science? I am not quite sure, but what attracts my attention is their scientific habits and

practices. And *they* are no doubt against compartmentalization of social science.

If we return to the present, Immanuel Wallerstein certainly has a program of what he calls a "unidisciplinary historical social science" -

this year the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton, New York has announced an ambitious post-doctoral training and research program focusing on multidisciplinary versus unidisciplinarity.

I now have three intellectual figures to commend. I cannot withstand the temptation to add one more, John Maynard Keynes. If we are inclined to look at him as an economist in the narrow sense, the interesting essay by Eleanor and John Toye will certainly teach us something else.¹ He reveals himself as a philosopher and a genuine holistic social scientist, trying to rethink fundamental contradictions in modern capitalist society at a critical turn of history, the deep depression and social uprooting of the 30s, - and possible solutions. He too is an intellectual inspirator, who transcends the disciplinary "petrifications" of modern social science.

Now we have four trans-disciplinary intellectuals:

Marx - Weber - Keynes - Wallerstein.

Two old ones - from the 19th century, and two from the present century. But we should not overestimate the distance in time between Weber and Keynes. Weber was born in 1864, and Keynes in 1883 (the year Marx died). Actually they met at least once, at the peace negotiations of Versailles 1919, one year before the death of Weber. Keynes attended the British delegation, Weber attended the German delegation. Keynes was embarrassed by the humiliating treatment of the losers of the war, he went right home and wrote a prophetic warning of the future: "The Economic Consequences of the Peace" (1920).

We have two "Marxists" (although we should be careful labelling Wallerstein as a Marxist, he is influenced by Marx, but does not make his own theoretical position quite clear). And two "bourgeois" - but two enlightened bourgeois, sceptical of the views and interests of the ruling elite, and no blind admirers of

¹ Eleanor Toye and John Toye: "Keynes, Bourgeois Marxism and the Ideal Social Republic", this volume p. 29

“progress”, rather concerned and uneasy about the future of modern society.

As an ardent and maybe crude Marxist in the 70's, I emphasized the distance between Marx and Weber/Keynes - and there are important contrasts, certainly. But today, I would like to underline another contrast: between adapting social science, which reflects social reality without questioning it, and social science which tries to rethink and understand by analytical means the dangers and possibilities of the human societal project. From the latter perspective, our four intellectual inspirators look more like relatives, and less like enemies.

The dilemma of social science - the case of SAM-BAS

I think my main point is made clear now. Before I try to touch the difficult question, *how* we could make good use of Marx, Weber and Wallerstein today, I would like to illustrate, in what way a strengthening of the established disciplines may imply a weakening or an outright decay of intellectual performance. The example of RUC's basic education “SAM-BAS” shows some fairly obvious problems.

Our SAM-BAS students attend courses and seminars introducing important theoretical and empirical contributions to social science. Today the courses are neatly separated in three boxes, at least the first year:

economics	political science	sociology
(the market)	(the state)	(social-cultural relations).

The terms in brackets could be answers to the question: What is the logic behind this tripartition?

Half of the time the students work in groups, preparing a “project” - an investigation of a subject and a problem chosen by themselves, ending up with a “report” (100-200 pages). This is an important part of the training in scientific methods and analysis, which the students receive. They get a chance to practice social science themselves, instead of just being told how to do it. The groups often prefer to study a narrow, limited subject, trying to answer specific formulated problems or questions. For instance: The subject may be “the Mafia in Italy”, and the question may be: “Why does this phenomenon, which should belong to the past, exist in a modern European society?”

Now, this activity is supposed to contribute to a broad and general understanding of social science - how is it possible? Only if the students use the specific subject "the Mafia" as a focal point, from which they establish a wider understanding of modern Italian society: What role do the Mafia have in the Italian economy? How is the Mafia able to penetrate the political system in Italy by use of clientelist connections? And why may people consider membership of the Mafia an access to social security, and a chance for attaining wealth and a privileged position? Answering such questions implies a broad and truly interdisciplinary study of economic, political and social life in Italy.

In most cases, it is impossible for the students to establish the wider theoretical and empirical connections on their own. They are dependent on the supervisor and the support they can get from courses and seminars: how to understand political power? what economic mechanisms lead to a blossoming "underground economy"? - and so on. Do they get the support they need?

The students almost uniformly answer: "No". There is dissatisfaction and disappointment because the students have big difficulties in finding the connections between disciplinary teaching and project studies. This is harmful for the outcome and quality of both. Most of the teachers consider it a problem too. It is not a new problem, indeed, it has been vividly discussed most of my 20 years as a teacher in the social sciences at RUC. But it has been reinforced in the 80s and 90s by turning back to the good old virtues: the established disciplines and the prevailing views of social reality. I would dare to make a prophecy here: if the problem is not tackled and at least partly solved, the broad transdisciplinary project directed SAM-BAS study programme will not survive in the long run.

I will elucidate the troubles with a few comments on *economics* - the hardhitter among the social science disciplines, and the dominant element of the SAM-BAS courses at least in the first year of the study programme. Today we use traditional economic textbooks: A bit of neo-classical microeconomics with postulates about supply and demand. A bit of Keynesian inspired circuit-formulas. And some advice on the instruments of government intervention in economic life. It presents certain economic laws, which are presumed eternal. It's a world of it's own. The conception is static all the way, thoughts of possible change and historical relativity are not conspicuous. The important international and global patterns of the present capitalist world

economy are confined to a minor chapter in the end: It is national economics in a very old-fashioned sense. And apparently no better textbook is available in the market - we do not produce alternatives ourselves, as we should do.

The stock of available economic doctrines are not easy to apply to a complex social and economic reality. And a concern for testing theories and doctrines against the real world of society is very hard to find: economic laws do not appear to need empirical proof. As advisers for students making projects we have to tell them, that this is exactly the way they should *not* practice scientific analysis, since empirical tests of assumptions and theoretical constructs are an important part of good scientific work.

Some teachers try to retreat to the classics: introducing Smith, Ricardo, Marshall, Marx, Weber, Keynes and so on, maybe even in the proper historical and societal context. But it is no solution. Today's students do not escape their confusion by learning about the heroes of the past. What they need is to learn *how* we can make use of the founding fathers today. Now I will try to say a few words about that - certainly no easy job.

How to make sense of Max Weber today

Weber was a historian, as Marx. Both scholars had a heavy load of knowledge and details - but at the same time they had a profound sensitivity to historical change. They eagerly tried to create conceptual order out of chaos and detail. Marx constructed a "Grand Theory", Weber did not. But Weber certainly worked in the same direction, only more modestly, more cautious with generalizations. I will sum up his merits in four points:

A. "Methodenstreit"

In the latter part of the 19th century the great *Methodenstreit* among German scholars took place. Two main positions were identified: Science could be *nomothetical*, or it could be *ideographical*.

nomothetical science

reality: governed by general laws
model: Newtonian physics
philosophy of science: positivism

ideographical science

reality: particular and unique
model: history, literature
phil. of science: hermeneutics

He connected it with the concept of "the modern rational bureaucracy", marked by prescriptions of the administrative acts of the single official and the limits of his authority. Again it is an ideal type, and no description of modern society in the empirical sense. But it is an attempt to catch the inner logic of modern institutions and administrations. In international development studies we can use the concept in opposition to discretionary and clientilist decisions, characterizing administrative manners in many Third World countries. But we can misuse it too, since it is a relative difference with shades, not an absolute contrast - do not forget the Mafia in Italy.

Weberian ideal type concepts like "legal power" and "modern bureaucracy" clearly cut across the disciplines of social science, which established territories and borders of their own just at the time Weber made his contributions to social science. His reasoning and his concepts are sociological as well as political, connected with considerations of economical aspects too - valuable contributions to the kind of interdisciplinary reasoning we need so much today.

C. Traditional - Modern

The third theme, where I would like to defend and praise Max Weber, is the conceptual pair "traditional - modern". I don't see any indication, that Weber conceived of only *one* kind of traditional social organisation. On the contrary, he seemed to be very conscious of the differences and peculiarities of non-capitalist societies.

Moreover, he had no conception of modern society supporting the normative and ideological dichotomy between traditional and modern, which today is so much in use, in development studies and in western self-conception and self-praise in general. He tended to be sceptic about the future of modern society, and his concept of "rational bureaucracy" was descriptive and analytical, not normative. It denoted rationality in a pure formal sense, not in any material sense. One can't conclude with reference to Weber that a society marked by "rationalization" is in itself rational - in the sense of guided by reason and leading to the greatest well-being for its inhabitants.

The problem for the emerging social sciences was: Should they imitate the victorious physical science and become positivists? Or should they conceive of themselves as belonging to the humanities, and become subjective interpreters and hermeneutics?

How Weber formulated his precise stand in this great debate, is not known to me. But if we take a look at his actual manner of investigating social reality, there is no doubt: He rejected the formulated positions, and sought a stand for knowledge of human society somewhere in between.

He saw no general laws governing historical change and human society, in that measure the subject of social science is unique phenomena that do not repeat themselves. But - it is not unique in the sense of the traditional historian, who looks at human society as a succession of single events. You can describe the events and put them in chronological order - and if you are a sophisticated historian, you may perhaps discuss the causal relations between single events and acts. But you have really no method as a historian - you rely on your own interpretative mind. Weber disagreed strongly with this view - he thought human society in transition could be studied and analyzed with more or less general concepts, which it was the task of the historian and the social scientist to construct and apply. And that was what he did himself with great ability.

B. Ideal Types

In his writings, Weber was very dedicated to the formulation of analytical concepts, useful for understanding the genesis and transformations of modern society. This is what Weber called "ideal types" ("Idealtypen"), conceptual tools which do not mirror exactly any empirical reality, but are intended as intellectual instruments to grasp essential features of social reality.

One of his most famous ideal type concepts is the concept of "power"/"hegemony" (the German term is "Herrschaft" - the translation is not very precise). Weber differentiated between 1) traditional, 2) charismatic and 3) legal power.² The third concept describes the ideal type of public power in modern western societies, with constitutional rules and prescriptions (but not necessarily with a political democracy - Weber himself lived in a "Kaiser Reich").

² Max Weber: "Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft", 1. Halbband, p. 122-148 (Tübingen 1972).

In his famous essay on "Objectivity in Social Science"³ he introduces the concept of "Zweckrationalität" (rationality of means to attain a defined aim or end). According to Weber social science can make empirical statements concerning the possibility or probability that proposed means will lead to the desired ends. You can discuss, of course, whether the end in itself is desirable and reasonable, but you can't determine it with scientific standards and methods. That implies, once again, that you can't use Weber to conclude that a society with a "rational bureaucracy" is itself rational and reasonable. He is used in this eurocentric manner very often, but it's certainly a misuse. Lars Rudebeck has exposed that clearly, and I agree with him.⁴ We must use Weber the opposite way: to unveil the habit of raising western society to the ideal social republic using pseudo-scientific normative concepts.

D. Values In Science

My fourth point is about values and objectivity in science, an indispensable discussion that was very animated at Danish universities a couple of decades ago. Today it has come almost to a standstill. Weber stated that as a social scientist you can't put yourself outside history and outside society, you are restrained by the biases of your time and your culture. And you are restrained by personal disposition and experience, which affects your understanding of social reality.⁵

What is your choice, then? If you want to be honest, must you not admit your profound subjectivity, which makes all scientific knowledge of society a contingent postulate. Weber came to a different conclusion. We can't put the knowing mind in brackets. But we can try to make our preconditions and premises conscious and explicit. If we do that, we aim at making possible a discussion of our concepts, our main lines of reasoning, and our methods of attaining knowledge. We can remove biases by making them known.

³ Max Weber: "Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis", in "Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre", p. 146-214 (Tübingen 1968).

⁴ Lars Rudebeck: "Traditional/Modern in Modernised Modernization Thinking. The Development of a Weberian Dichotomy", this volume p. 131

⁵ Max Weber, op. cit., my interpretation.

And that is what we need today. Positivism is not by itself the problem any longer, since very few social scientists would defend that position.

The problem is to reveal the hidden premises and biases behind social science - and the academic mainstream habit today is quite opposite, to try to hide them and look neutral and unbiased.

I have found no better exposition of the problems of "objectivity in social science" than Weber's essay, and it is still very useful to read today. Many years later Gunnar Myrdal revived the discussion.⁶ But his main points and his solutions were essentially the same as Weber's fourtyfour years before. Weber is not easy to read - but it's worth the pain.

Waking up Marx

The difficulties with Karl Marx are much more delicate, since he is made a dead dog today. I believe that marxist intellectuals have contributed a good deal to that - inadvertently. He has been treated not only as a founding father, but as a hero standing outside history, a biblical prophet telling eternal truths. I don't know of any other intellectual movement, which is so pitifully dependent on a father figure who lived more than a hundred years ago. One can make a god of him - but of course he can't stand it. He was much of a genius, but he was a historical person too. If you put him outside history, while history is moving along - then some day you will have to knock him off his pedestal. It is not the problem of Marx, it is the problem of his followers.

Consequently, I will try to look at him as a historical person, with important insights in the society of his own time, but with no superhuman prophetic abilities. Several things Marx correctly pointed out some 125 years ago are wrong today - of course, because history and society do not stand still.

Let's take a "Weberian" look at Marx: a person with great talent for the analysis of history and society as a whole, but constrained, of course, by his time and culture. Revealing the limitations of Marx may set him free, make him human - and contribute to preserve what has *not* become antiquated. When we find out, where he was wrong, and where the future proved him

⁶ Gunnar Myrdal: "Value in Social Theory" (London 1958), "Asian Drama", Vol. I, p. 8-69 (New York and Toronto 1968), "The Challenge of World Poverty", p. 3-29 (New York and Toronto 1970).

wrong, we are ready to appreciate, that he had some understanding of human history, which is still relevant today. And he elaborated supreme analytical concepts and methods, which may inspire today if we open our fantasy (instead of repeating without fantasy). Concerning this methodological aspect, I would not take "Das Kapital" as the only central text, but would consider the text called "Grundrisse" as equally important.

I would like to specify my general comments in three points:

A. Capitalism In General - Or The British Model?

I am not sure Marx really investigated "capitalism in general" or "the general laws of capitalism development" in "Das Kapital". I believe he partly just studied *British capitalism*, the only full-fledged industrial society at the time he wrote his principal work. It has some important implications, let me give just one example:

Marx describes capitalist accumulation as self-enforcing, as a "perpetuum mobile", accumulation of capital creates more accumulation in a continuous process - at least until crisis or the working class takes power. He made a precise analysis of British capitalism at his time. But it was not French, or German, or Japanese capitalism, which in various forms needed the state much more, as a midwife and as a regulator of social problems and class tensions.

Consequently, the future witnessed less market capitalism and more complex versions of capitalism, with no such simple laws as Marx tries to detect in "Das Kapital". Society did not divide in only two classes, as Marx imagined. Global competition took place with political-military as well as economic weapons. Crises and centralization of capitalist accumulation did happen, as he predicted, but in more complicated and politically influenced ways. British *laissez-faire* capitalism is not a sufficient model for the analysis of global capitalism in the 20th century. His followers were confronted with a new challenge, the immense task of accommodating Marxian analysis to "mature" and "late" capitalism. They did not solve the problem very well.

B. Evolutionism And Eurocentrism

Even if Marx was a revolutionary critic of contemporary society, he was influenced by dominant trends in his own culture, of course. Two salient features of 19th century Europe were belief in inevitable progress, *evolutionism*, and belief in *European superiority*. He was led to mistakes by both beliefs.

He understated the ability of foreign cultures to create change and material progress. He viewed India and China as old cultures, stagnant Asian modes of production, which could go nowhere without the help of Europeans. And he overstated the "civilizing influence" and the "development of productive forces" which would emanate from modern European capitalism. In a way, Marx was far too fond of capitalism, too impressed by its achievements. For a long time he underestimated the destructive forces. In 1853 he asserted that building British railways in India would inevitably bring fully fledged industrialization to the country.⁷ In fact he believed, at least for the time being, that modern capitalism would spread gradually from Europe to the whole world, and that essentially the same forms of modernization would occur everywhere.

As years passed, he became considerably more sceptical of the civilizing influence of capitalism in foreign continents (and in Ireland).. But he never formulated a new conclusion: that modern capitalism creates uneven development on the global stage. It was a missing link in the marxist movement. Lenin made good efforts to correct it. But a complete break with former wrong assumptions was not attained before the arrival of the dependency school in the 1960's.

C. From Class Struggles To A Classless Society?

The evolutionism of the 19th century made Marx far too optimistic on behalf of the transition from capitalism to socialism. When the working class and its organizations grew stronger, he thought the struggle between the classes would somehow by itself lead to a struggle for a new society without classes and without exploitation. It was a grand vision, but it was certainly mistaken. The proletariat could not take care of its historical mission.

Today it is not difficult to see, that there is a long way from fighting for your own material wellbeing to the fight for a new society, a visionary classless social republic. On that point Keynes was much more sceptical 50 years later - not only of the working class, but of the bourgeoisie too. He did not trust its ability to transcend its own vested interests.

Did the optimistic evolutionism of his time seduce Marx to some kind of "*material determinism*"? I do not think so. At some places he talks as if "the natural laws of capitalist development"

⁷ Shlomo Avineri (ed.): "Karl Marx on Colonization and Modernization", p. 136 (New York 1969).

would by themselves lead to the breakdown of the existing societal order and the creation of socialism. But the break with capitalism is not attained, of course, just by waiting until history itself has shown its magic. Marx did not believe that (maybe Karl Kautsky did). He thought class struggles were a driving force in human history. He was a revolutionary, expecting revolutionary acts from the working class. He tried to encourage them, by telling that history was on their side. But a man who has told us that human beings make their own history, only not under circumstances chosen by themselves, is not a determinist. We have to quit such beliefs to use Marx in a fruitful way today.

The ambitions of Wallerstein

Immanuel Wallerstein would certainly like to compose a new "grand theory". He has already made some serious attempts.⁸ Whether he considers himself a true follower of Marx is not quite clear. He does not follow the words of Marx, more the spirit: He tries to create an encompassing theory of "historical capitalism" - and he makes essential breaks with assumptions in the Marxian theory.

A. Historical Capitalism

He considers capitalism as ever-changing, it is historical capitalism in the literal sense. It arises out of human history, and much earlier than Marx thought. According to Wallerstein, the foundations of a capitalist world economy were created in the 16th century. In the other end we have no definite or mature capitalism, it is always in the process of transformation and change. Consequently, there exists no "capitalism in general", with unchanging features. Many of Wallerstein's new-coined concepts are intended as tools to grasp this process of never-stopping historical transformation: "semi periphery", "change of hegemony", "incorporation in the world economy", etc.

B. World Capitalism

Wallerstein conceives capitalism as a global force that produces uneven development and unequal distribution of power. There is no image here of a capitalism, which spreads out from Europe like

⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein: "The Modern World-System" Vol. I-III (Academic Press 1974, 1980, 1989).

waves in the water, and in the end encompasses the whole of the world in a uniform way.

The foundations of a theory of unequal capitalist development were produced in the 60s and 70s by the dependency school. But Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin formulated the new theoretical assumptions which should become an alternative to traditional Marxism in a very static way. Processes and structures of unequal development tend to freeze relations between strong and weak countries and regions. Progressive change of the weakest parts of the world system was consequently blocked, according to Frank and Amin.

The advantage of Wallerstein is that he investigates unequal development in a dynamic framework, relations of economic and political power are strong, but patterns of domination, dependency and exploitation may change, often when dominated states are able to "seize the chance".

C. Economic Determinism?

Wallerstein is like Marx quite often accused of economic determinism. When he presents his world system analysis in general terms⁹, we may easily get the impression, that forceful competitive mechanisms and the prevailing divisions of production and trade around the world determine the overall pattern of events.

But if we go to his opus major, "The Modern World System I-III", we are offered a very detailed and complicated analysis of interweaving social, political and economic relations. I really do not find any trace of determinism here. It's a provocative work, full of surprises. In Wallerstein's presentation, there is no bourgeois revolution in France in 1789, and the concept of an industrial revolution in Britain does not fit well either.

But he leaves us with a little problem. He has worked on his opus major for more than twenty years - the first volume came out in 1974. We have three volumes now - but the third one closes with the 1840s. It will certainly take a long time, before we are acquainted with his thoughts concerning modern society and modern history.

Wallerstein tries to enforce a very ambitious and very interdisciplinary program of historical and societal research. I will give you just one taste of the ongoing investigations at the Fernand Braudel Center. One working group has the task of

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein: "Historical Capitalism" (London 1983).

studying global transformations in the period 1945-1990. They will use the following vectors (factors) in the analysis - hold your breath: antisystemic movements, ecology, education, finance, food and nutrition, health, interstate organizations, interstate relationships/geopolitics, labor force, military, peasantries, religious institutions, science, state cohesion, transnational enterprises, women, location of world production¹⁰.

Maybe they will not be able to handle and integrate the mountain of information they collect. But they do not look scared by the enormous task, and maybe this is the sort of courage from social scientists we need a little more of!

¹⁰ NEWSLETTER No.16, August 1992, Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton USA, p. 7.

