

**DISCONTINUITY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES:
A PLEA FOR PRAXEOLOGY**

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by

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DISCONTINUITY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The subject I have chosen as a topic for discussion on this memorable day is discontinuity and the social sciences. As discontinuity I consider a situation in which facts or concepts that for the observer should be related for logical, emotional or functional reasons, present themselves in a disjunctive way. At first it does not matter whether this situation is only perceived as such or whether it is real.

Discontinuity in modern life is not only found in connection with the social sciences; it can also be discussed in a far wider context. Modern development since the beginning of the nineteenth century is characterized by a process of differentiation in society that is accompanied by a growing interdependence of the existing and emerging fields of human activity. This process has been accelerated in the twentieth century and especially since the end of World War I.

Part of this development which has a dominating effect on the dynamics in other fields, is the increase in skills of control over men and nature which creates the necessity of still further control. It is the very increase of these skills that not only binds men closer together, but binds moreover society closer to its physical environment, creating also in this respect greater interdependency.

It was in particular the German-Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim living in the forties in Britain, who first considered the importance of interdependency in modern society.

The growth of interdependency in the modern world can also be viewed from another angle: the angle of incorporation. Local communities are more and more incorporated in regional and national units creating hereby a complex network of spatial and socio-economic relations. This development which can be observed as an internal process in the different societies all over the world, cannot, however, be properly studied without considering their external relations. Modern development brings these societies in still greater contact with each other in some sort of systemic order of mutual dependency. Factors such as economic and cultural exchange, power-politics, law and even morals, co-operate in bringing about a world-wide interconnected whole.

Another characteristic of interdependency in modern life is its scale. This growth of scale has two aspects: one defined by the increase of internal connections, the other by the size of the interrelated social entities.

If I go on talking about the fascinating subject of interdependency, more and more people in this audience will start wondering whether they had

not misheard my opening remark that I was going to speak on discontinuity. But one cannot understand discontinuity in the modern world without considering it against the background of the increasing interdependency I have been discussing. Before continuing in particular on discontinuity, let me first mention a point of terminology that is common in discussing interrelations.

Especially in literature on biological and social science, one often comes across the term integration. It is seldom satisfactorily defined and often includes hidden notions of functional adaptation based on a judgement of desired and undesired effects. Moreover, it often suggests existence of systems in which everything has its proper place in the functioning of a completely rationalized unit. In such a system contradiction and conflict may also have their proper place not necessarily being in opposition to this concept of an all embracing system. This view presents many problems and I shall not go into them here. Thus I shall avoid the term integration and continue to speak of interdependency which is a more general and neutral concept indicating that two or more elements are mutually dependent.

Let me make another remark before coming to the subject of discontinuity and the social sciences in particular. I do not intend to deal with a problem that is commonly designated as such in social change theory, namely the continuity or discontinuity of different stages in structural development.

I spoke of the growth of interdependency which implies a diminution of specific discontinuity in modern life. This growth should not be understood as a movement in all fields with evolutionary tendencies in one direction leading to an over-all decrease of discontinuities. It is possible that increase in interdependency in one field or between fields, will lead to discontinuity in another field or between other fields. With this point in mind we can see that the growth of material interdependency has not found its reflexion in the growth of interdependency of thought-processes. In fact the beginning of modern development was everywhere characterized by a fragmentation of an interdependent world-view which was at the same time closely related with the political, social and economic processes in the societies known all over the world. The societies with a more unified culture showed also a closer relation between thought and practice. They supplied more generally understandable explanations and a better sense of direction to their members, creating also a greater predictability of social behaviour. Modern development introduced everywhere a variety of lifestyles, beliefs, morals and thought-styles, that increases the choices of individuals, but lessens the predictability of social behaviour, and confronts individuals with a discontinuous social and cultural universe. In other fields, such as the economic and the social sector, development creates discontinuities.

Development being a process of differentiation results in a complex world with interdependencies that are not only often not conceived, but also with spiritual contradictions and conflicting interests that puzzles the human mind leaving modern men with problems of too great a disharmony. Where the spatial and cultural discontinuity of a world with isolated communities and societies is passing away, new forms of discontinuity present themselves everywhere. Moreover, the course of development may result in making existing discontinuities that did not matter much in former circumstances undesirable or noxious in the new situation. This phase demands a new identification of problems and skills of control which will undoubtedly present their problems in the next stage.

I remember very well how and when the aspects of discontinuity in the modern developed countries made their impression on my mind. Coming as a boy of fourteen from Surinam, a society that looks similar to those of the West Indian islands, to the Netherlands, one of the most highly developed countries, I was struck by the intermingling in Dutch life of traditional and often antiquated elements and modern traits. I was amazed by the contradictions of social and political views, the isolation of individuals and their families, the wealth and the not immediately perceptible poverty that still existed at that time and looked out of place. Surinam-society with its plural aspects of different ethnic groups of American Indian, African Indian, Javanese and European extraction looked less discontinuous to me, even taking into account the striking poverty of sections of its population.

Already at an early stage in history all known societies developed - as mentioned before - a world-view that not only gave an explanation to the mind questioning the out-side world in wonder, but offered also legitimation, guidelines and the necessary know-how for daily practice.

The development of the mental outlook on the physical and social universe has been part and parcel of every development of culture and society. This out-look developed in the same way along the path of differentiation and increasing interdependency and this development created also, as I pointed out, discontinuity in its own realm as well as discontinuity in many ways of thought and practice. From the traditional world-view of Western culture, fields of thought emerged as separate domains, from the times of ancient Greece to the present day as a great movement over the centuries. Each of these domains, religion, philosophy, mathematics, the sciences evolved at a particular juncture of time. As they emerged, they not only defined the objects of their special interests, but they determined a special set of rules that characterized the way in which they analysed and presented the world. For all the sciences general concepts such as

truth, empirical verification and objectivity, became predominant. However, in considering the many-sided objects of the world, the different sciences set special rules by determining the kind of characteristics they were looking for by isolating them. This was an important factor in accelerating the rapid development of scientific knowledge. It was this special way of looking at things, however, that started an autonomous course of the different disciplines and even sectors within disciplines, that would force them more and more apart in a discontinuous universe of sciences, no longer in a position to give a coherent picture of the world.

In this movement the processes of thought were for a large part determined by social, economic and political factors. Nevertheless there was also a certain autonomy of mind; especially in the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. This autonomy and the way the sciences were organized, made it possible for the disciplines to go their own way more independently than before. On the other hand, especially in the beginning of our century, political and economic processes became more and more dependent on the sciences. This could be observed in particular in two respects: in the strong interdependence of the economy and technology based on the natural sciences, and the interdependence between economics and industry for industrial planning as well as the interdependence between economics and the economic planning and policy of the government.

Two total wars demanding a complete mobilization of human and material resources gave a great impetus to this process. This growth of interdependency demanded greater co-operation of disciplines, but unfortunately coincided, as we have seen, with the growing discontinuity of the sciences. However, not only the sciences more than before became a force on their own, the political, social and economic sectors themselves, notwithstanding their vital connections, moved more strongly than before according to their own laws, also keeping a greater distance from human and moral prescriptions.

The social sciences were the last in line to evolve, sociology and anthropology emerging at the end from philosophy, in particular the philosophy of history, cultural history and political science at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was the time of the aftermath of the French Revolution and the start of the industrial revolution.

Religion had lost its sway over the minds of many individuals and over society as a whole, public opinion played a greater part than before; larger groups could influence collective political and economic decisions. A new class, the bourgeoisie, became the leading force in society. Nationalism and

democracy in their modern form appeared, but they brought larger groups in competition and conflict.

The modern bureaucratic state made its appearance and was slowly pushed by all the structural changes in the direction of still greater control over public life, undoing unreal theories of complete laissez faire in politics. Imperialism and colonialism moved towards their heyday creating new types of discontinuity all over the world.

These times were experienced as a period of crisis; the social sciences were a response to the problems posed by these upheavals and the increasing complexity of society. The founding fathers of sociology, Saint Simon, Comte, Spencer and Marx initially had two main targets: to move from the speculations of the philosophy of history to a positive science of society and to give a comprehensive view of its development for guidance. In anthropology evolutionism and historicism, be it in a more detached way, steered the same sort of course. The social sciences should provide the explanation, legitimation and the guidelines for action that was no longer supplied by a comprehensive world view. Man looked back in history to find guidance for the future.

The second group of social scientists that gave sociology and anthropology its definite shape as an autonomous discipline, Toennies, Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Tarde and others, were still motivated by the original impulses, but they moved more strongly in the direction of a positive science. They still kept a comprehensive study of global society and its development in mind, but they moved further away from the pretension that they could supply direct guide-lines for action. Two marked discontinuities came into being: discontinuity of philosophy and, especially after Weber, of the philosophical clarification of the meta-theoretical foundations of the social sciences and discontinuity of the social sciences and practice. Also the links with history became very meagre. Within the social sciences themselves further discontinuities appeared. The relation between economics, political science, sociology and social anthropology became gradually more tenuous; it is interesting to note that because of this discontinuity the fields of economic sociology and anthropology made a slow start only shortly before World War II and the same could be said about political sociology and anthropology. Also sociology and anthropology diverged strongly in the first half of this century with loss on both sides. Spencer, Marx, Weber and Durkheim still could inspire sociologists as well as anthropologists, especially since they were themselves familiar with data from other cultures. But after them direct connections and mutual influencing became small between these disciplines. Within sociology further discontinuities made their appearance. In the theoretical field several schools of

thought developed alongside each other with little relation. This theoretical pluralism need not be necessarily a negative factor. It might be that the nature of the social sciences makes it desirable to have several ways to study social life; these ways may be each pertinent to a special set of problems, they may also be complimentary. Pluralism should then be welcomed as a highly desirable and necessary phenomenon. If multiplicity of theories is, however, not reviewed consciously for its necessity and real contribution to insight, pluralism will become harmful, because it will obscure issues, create uncertainty, diffusedness of efforts and will lead easily to dogmatism, separatism and mutual incrimination, restricting the field of fruitful scientific discourse. It can also become easily a fertile field for the flowering of pontifical chic or a mere market phenomenon. In fact pluralism meaning discontinuity, is a negative factor, and it is this kind of pluralism that is for a large part observable within sociology and anthropology at this time.

I am not certain, but there are indications for it, whether this pluralism is not closely related to another fact exerting a negative influence on the operation of social sciences. It is possible that too much diversified discussion on scientific procedures and instruments, and what is mostly presented as theory falls under this heading, hampers the trade itself. It might have been an impediment for the establishment of a real art of macro- and micro-analysis oriented to operations. Macro- and micro-analysis have been little formalized and have not been well developed, with the results that they have been insufficiently introduced in sociological studies in a systematic way so far as I can judge from my own experience.

It is also likely that another discontinuity in sociology issued from or was at least fortified by this state of theory, that is the discontinuity of theory and empirical research. Schools of theory one after another presented themselves that had little bearing on ongoing empirical research. At the same time social research methods, in particular social statistics, made tremendous progress outpacing the growth of a more organized and relevant body of social knowledge, that could contribute to satisfactory explanations and insight in the social problems of the modern world. Part of ongoing research, of course made valuable contributions to daily administrative problems and was acknowledged as such. The value of theory for this research was, however, very small and the latter contributed in its turn little to the theoretical field.

I mentioned earlier the discontinuity of the social sciences and practice. Sociology and anthropology started with the intention to give a comprehensive interpretation of culture and society and to give guidelines for its

conduct. They did not succeed in reaching these targets. In relation to the first target I shall limit myself to a few remarks. The subject is important but lends itself to a deeper treatment than possible at this moment. I believe that the sciences because of their specific nature cannot produce a set of thoughts that can function as a comprehensive world-view and replace the former thought-complexes in all ways. They can pass on the proper elements for the establishment of a thought-complex that can function in a number of ways as the former world-views, but nothing more. This is not a failure since their value should be looked for in another direction. A comprehensive world view can only be produced by speculation and lies as such within the field of philosophy or religion. The discontinuity of philosophy and the sciences had, however, consequences in making the latter less useful in this direction.

Secondly, in particular the social sciences, were often not able to produce significant insights for society because of their too positivistic orientation and their fear not to live up to scientific standards inspired by the natural sciences. But I have to leave the matter here, and to concentrate on questions related to the other target, the contribution to social engineering, a term that summarizes very well the original pretense.

The relation of the social sciences and the conduct of society is determined by the state of these sciences on the one side and the conceptions of politicians and public and private managers and their willingness to use them in their operations on the other. Of course public opinion plays also a role in this respect. For a long period in the nineteenth and twentieth century politics as well as public and private management had no direct relations with the social sciences; their main impact was indirect by influencing the thought of politicians, administrators and managers.

Politics and administration were the arts of "muddling through" above all. As the interdependencies of the different social and economic activities became more obvious and the need for further rational organization of public life became more apparent, it was in particular economics which was considered as a necessary and respectable aid for government policy. Especially after Keynes and the introduction of a full-grown statistical macro-economy, high hopes were set on steering economic life through planning and control. The degree to which this was desirable or possible was a point of discussion, not the fact that modern economy was in need of a science of intervention and that modern economics could supply such a science. This same kind of hope was projected on the planned economic development of the countries of the Third World, as they are now commonly called. During the last years this rise in expectations has stopped and the confidence in the steering capacities of economics has diminished.

A period of questioning of the basic starting points of this science has begun as well as of its applicability. But not only these issues but also its fundamental approach to modern problems is questioned. The strong currents of neo-marxist inspiration which appeared on the scene are only a particular part of this movement. In fact a special problem of discontinuity is here at stake. Not only a discontinuity of economics and economic reality, but also of economics and the other social sciences which do not co-operate sufficiently and are unable to support each other. An important conclusion might be that economics all by itself was not able to do the job.

Sociology and anthropology were never so close to policy as economics. They played a minor role in smaller sectors of health, social work and education or in projects on local level. During the colonial and post-colonial period they were occasionally called-in by government in Third World countries. They participated also here and there in the work of bureaus of consulting engineers. But nowhere they participated regularly and continuously in policy-making and government activities. The appreciation of these disciplines had its ups and downs, but in whatever phase it was, it always seemed to me that they were judged on the basis of too many misunderstandings of their potentials and the nature of the contributions they made or could have made, if they had been given a proper chance.

I believe, however, that their prestige and use as a social science of intervention was seriously hampered by the state of discontinuity in their own house. This state is also partly responsible for the reaction of a younger generation which started to question the traditional foundations of sociology and anthropology, their orientation and their relevance for the problems of to-day. Recent discussions on topics such as value-freedom and relevance leave one, who is familiar with the history and theory of philosophy and the social sciences, often in wonder and surprise faced with a picture of academics discovering old issues and reopening debates in many cases on a far more superficial level than before, or that of people discovering after years of study the facts of life. And sometimes one is inclined to think that scientific study may in certain respects deafen the ears to what makes human beings and society thick. But all this proves that we shall become still more concerned about the discontinuity in the house of the social sciences, which perhaps could better be called the spirit of partition.

At the end of my address, I should like to stress a point that I find most important for the application of sociology and anthropology in practice, that is the underdevelopment of the fields of applied sociology and anthropology. They were often considered as fields of secondhand interest and

proper hunting grounds for people not clever enough to study theory or do advanced empirical research. In contrast to these opinions I am convinced that an adequate science of intervention demands great capabilities and special gifts. Scientists working in the applied field, often left it disappointed because of the slight impact they could make on policy. I think, however, there was also a certain depreciation of the field since many social scientists are ill-prepared to deal with problems of policy. Applied social science is a difficult field. It demands not only a good theoretical background, but also good schooling in macro- and micro-analysis as well as a training in identifying social problems. On top of that it demands managerial insight and a practical mind.

One of the most urgent needs, however, for the proper application of the social sciences is a systematic development of an art of intervention; in this respect there is much know-how that needs to be formalized. Applied social science is in need of theoretical thinking in questions preliminary to intervention and the modalities of intervention, it should also study the relations of the sociologist as an adviser to his clients and society in general as a basic issue in intervention. What is missing is praxeology. Applied sociology is not the art of doing errands for politicians and administrators or only an art of muddling through, although this art should not be missing amongst the capabilities of an applied sociologist. The warning I give in this respect is that the social sciences will not be able to do the job by supplying their trainees disconnected pieces of practical knowledge and a kind of handiness.

An applied sociology on a theoretical basis is the necessary final piece in the construction of a mature social science that tries to lessen the existing discontinuities.

The picture I tried to paint was done with broad strokes. I am aware that I painted over many shades and dark spots, but I thought that in doing so specific characteristics of the topics I was discussing might be brought out. A day like this is always a good occasion to look at things from a distance in a more general way and to place them against their historical background.

But are there some conclusions to be drawn here at the end of my address? I did not speak out of nostalgia for the security of an undivided world-view nor do I long for the old securities of the social sciences. I was always inclined to question everything. I will also not put forward exhortations, periodically to the forefront, for multidisciplinary work and I am not going to suggest new symposia on this subject. Of course I believe that only a multidisciplinary approach can give satisfactory results for the understanding of the world and as a basis for action. But instead of discussing

the problems of multi-disciplinary studies in a general way, I should like to suggest that the start should be made from the problems themselves. Let groups of social scientists come together and identify in a systematic way what according to them are the basic problems of importance in their field or in their country, and let them then specify what precisely they want to know about these problems. This will lead them naturally to look for people in other fields who might contribute to finding the answers. What is needed in this operation is a realistic sense of problems and versatile open minds. I think that out of these operations real multi-disciplinary work will emerge and will later find its explicit theoretical foundation. Multidisciplinary efforts should be in the first place problem-oriented. For sociology and anthropology it will, however, be necessary for satisfactory participation in this operation to give full attention to the development of applied social science as an adequate social science of intervention. And this means that the sociologist or anthropologist has not only to be trained as a craftsman, but that he should be supported in his action-oriented approach by a systematic praxeology, a science of practice.

I think that the approach I suggested, might have special importance for countries such as the West Indies. There is not such a thing as an European, Asian, French or German science unless one wants to indicate where the work produced comes from. So there are also no West Indian sciences. But what exists and should be further developed are specializations particularly in the social sciences, dealing with the special problems of a cultural or geographical area, developing knowledge that can be fruitfully applied herein. As such these specializations will have a character of their own.

For you to participate in the development of such knowledge for your country is a high and rewarding task and I wish you much success in your efforts in the years ahead.

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