



A
Keynote Lecture
by

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CHALLENGES FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THE
NEW MILLENNIUM

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Distinguished guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It was with some hesitation that I accepted the invitation to be with you here tonight and address you on “Challenges for the Social Sciences in the New Millennium” – hesitation because it is always risky for a former professor to rejoin his colleagues and pretend he has become the bearer of new wisdoms, hesitation because the changes in recent decades have been so fundamental and wide-ranging that any attempt to predict the course of development in the coming centuries seems somehow arrogant to say the least.

When I travelled from Iceland more than thirty years ago to begin my university studies in Britain the world of the social sciences was straightforward and stable. In the first political science lecture a learned and respected professor waved a pair of scissors in front of the students, proceeded to cut the Times of that morning into pieces and thus introduced to us what he described as the tools of the social sciences; and the size of the scissors would indeed have made my Grandmother proud.

The teaching of political science at that time consisted of examining Britain and the USA which were democratic and praiseworthy, the USSR which was totalitarian and bad, and France which was a little bit of both. In sociology the family, class and social mobility comprised almost the entire analysis and anthropology consisted of studying Zulus in Africa with a little bit of Shakespeare thrown in.

For my PhD studies in the late sixties I had the good fortune of being offered to join a small group of scholars led by the distinguished political scientists Robert Dahl, Stein Rokkan and Hans Dhalder who had decided to examine for the first time what they referred to as the Smaller European Democracies, a group of countries which included Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, together with Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland and Switzerland. The political systems of those countries were somehow judged to be so outside the main-stream interest in the four big powers – the USA, the UK, France and the USSR – as to warrant a special project financed by the Ford Foundation. Even though the leaders of this project were the foremost political scientists of their time they assumed like everybody else that the political division of Europe would remain the same for all the foreseeable future. Never, not once, during the five years which the project lasted was there a discussion of any fundamental changes taking place. We were all engaged in studying a stable world.

Thirty years later, with the political, economic and social transformation moving at such speed as to make understanding and analysis, not to mention prediction, an almost impossible task, it might be seen as rather ironic to invite me in the light of my own experience to talk about the role of the social sciences in the new millennium.

Of course, I could have my prediction and analysis very brief and simply say to you in five words: You're in for great surprises! – and then leave you to figure out the implication of that profound statement.

But since you were kind enough to invite me to be with you here tonight, I will paraphrase Friedman's classic statement and say that there is no such thing as a free dinner, and then attempt to outline a few of my reflections on what will influence the social sciences in the times ahead.

Let me first emphasise that despite the different fashions in the social sciences I believe our task is still the old commandment: To seek reliable knowledge – and not yield in our obligation to provide hard-headed analysis and facts. The more that social scientists are drawn into the decision-making processes, the greater will be the tendency to clothe contributions in the fashion of the times, to employ concepts, select studies and tailor the presentation in order to suit the powerful forces of the decision-making institutions. Their leaders have a tendency to employ social scientists in order to facilitate particular processes and to obtain agreements on predetermined policies. It is not always popular to be the bearer of true and bad tidings; in the old Viking times such tellers of truths were often punished, even executed. Although the risks are less dramatic in modern times it can require a strong character and deep commitment to science to adhere to the old commandment of scientific discovery: always be faithful to the endeavour of seeking the truth.

Secondly, and as an example of the tension between truth and fashion in the social sciences, let us look briefly at Europe – this almost mythical entity which is supposed to be evolving towards unification, thus implying the withering away of the nation state. Is this really so? Or are the nation states in Europe at the opening of the new millennium more vibrant and thriving than ever before? Are not some of the most dramatic tensions, even armed conflicts, on the Continent caused by attempts to create even more nation states? The Council of Europe, which for decades numbered only about twenty member states, now has around forty and is still growing. The expansion of NATO and the enlargement of the European Union are both attempts to deal with the increasing number of independent, democratic and sovereign states in Europe. Just before the middle of the twentieth century almost all nation states in Europe had been crushed by communist, nazi or fascist empires and the

fashion of those times was for many the subjugation of national rights to broad ideologies defined by class or race. Now, however, we are marching into the new millennium with over forty European states demanding a rightful role in the evolution of the continent. The nation state seems to be thriving as never before, not only here in Europe but also in other parts of the world.

My next five observations deal with areas where questions of rights seem to have taken the place of pragmatic approaches as the key ingredient.

- ?? Human rights have now become the primary concern in political and social development and a criterion in determining the success or failure of policies and political institutions. Previously, human rights were the subject of constitutional lawyers and received very little attention in the training of social scientists, but I believe human rights will increasingly become a core issue of the future, the test by which national and international actions will be measured as well as being the driving force of political and social change.
- ?? Minority groups, ethnic, social and political, the disabled, drug addicts, the very poor, social outcasts – all those who do not belong to the affluent middle classes will increasingly demand attention and the media and public organisations will highlight their problems and disadvantages. The broad analysis practised by the established traditional social sciences will have to make room for studies of groups and subsections of society. Political science and sociology might thus benefit from drawing on the methods and theories of anthropological research. Concepts referring to social exclusion, minorities, life-styles and various temporary factions of society will thus increasingly complement the traditional analytical concepts of class, age, occupation, income and even sex. People, in their misery as well as their grandeur, will be the necessary subject matter to study if we hope to be able to understand the evolution of our ever more fragmented societies.
- ?? The environment, the interplay between man and nature which the classical philosophers thought to be fundamental to understanding society, has now again become crucial, not because social scientists have recently discovered the vital nature of that relationship but because the democratic and technical processes of economic and social evolution brought

nature back into the political system, by means of the problems created by mankind's encroachment upon the environment. The impact of this development will become more and more dominant in the years ahead, especially since various public movements as well as many political parties see it as fundamental to the future of mankind and to the survival of mother Earth.

- ?? Genetic research has in recent years opened up a new set of questions which have necessitated decisions by parliaments, governments, political parties and public organisations, as well as professional groups and the public. How do we balance the desire to seek cures for some of the most widespread and dangerous diseases of our times with the requirement to guarantee privacy and personal rights, as well as securing a fair distribution of the potential profits created by such research? My small nation has in the last two years gone through an extensive open debate regarding these issues which has clearly demonstrated that the process of scientific discovery will in the future bring a new set of challenges and transformation to our social and political institutions as well as becoming potentially the driving force of economic change in the twenty-first century.
- ?? The new Internet and information technologies are already challenging ideas and laws pertaining to democratic decision-making, national sovereignty, privacy, free speech and law enforcement. No government or international institution seems able to direct this evolution and thus in the new millennium we will probably face a wider-ranging transformation of the power of the individual than ever before.

The eighth element of my vision for the social sciences in the new millennium is the growing importance of moral standards in decision-making and public performance. In the past the question of morals was supposed to be a private matter so long as one did not break the law; we were very pragmatic in our judgments. Now, however, I see an ever-growing emphasis on employing moral standards with respect to public performance, by institutions and individual decision-makers alike. The transparency and global interaction of modern media has strengthened this development. The training of social scientists has so far not made us particularly skilled in analysing this interplay between morals and public action and once again the spirit of the times has preceded our academic progress.

The ninth element is the impact of religion on political and social behaviour. Throughout most of the twentieth century religion was somehow outside the scope of our research, except in very limited ways, but we are now increasingly witnessing the influence of religion on the political and the social cleavages of modern societies. Whether it is the sway of religious groups in the USA, the religious divisions among the immigrant populations of European societies or the impact of Muslim fundamentalism on international politics, the evidence points clearly towards the need to give the study of religion an enhanced place in the workshop of the social sciences.

The tenth element is the mobility of people all over the world, between states as well as within them, from one continent to another, across the great oceans of the world. People of all nationalities, races, religions and professions are on the move as never before and no institution or public authority, national or international, can control this process. It is of the utmost importance to examine the causes as well as the consequences of this monumental flux because it could potentially become the most important instigator of social change in the 21st century.

The eleventh element concerns new bases of prosperity in the information economy of the future. The new economy will increasingly be dependent upon the social sciences for harvesting the ever more important human resources (as already reflected in growing emphasis on the management of human resources). Innovation in the labour market, at the micro level of individual workplaces and in education will to a greater extent utilize the tools and knowledge of the social sciences, both for increasing prosperity and for distributing it equitably amongst the populations.

The twelfth element is the need for integrated cross-disciplinary approaches in research and decision-making. Although specialization is necessary to comprehensive understanding, effective solutions will only be found by enlisting all the social sciences. In my first years at university we were introduced to all the social sciences – political science, sociology, anthropology and economics – and specialization in one discipline came into force in the third year of study. Throughout my professional life, both within the University and in the public arena, I have realised that this exposure to different social science disciplines was perhaps the best part of my university education. In the last decade or two the ambition and prestige of professors and researchers, however, have brought specialization forward and reduced the exposure to different social science disciplines. Somehow, I think we are now entering a new world where the old interdisciplinary training, almost in the classical

sense of unified social sciences, must be the guideline in training wise and effective social scientists for the future.

This brings me to my final observation, the need to remember what centuries or even a few thousand years ago brought philosophers and thinkers to analyse the nature of man and society, to understand the essence of political, social and economic evolution. In looking into the uncertain prospects of the new millennium the classical texts can provide us with guidelines, show us what should be the real purpose of our common journey.

Justice and democracy. These two ideals of our civilisation, extending from the dialogues of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and their disciples and through centuries of European thought influenced by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mills, Marx and many others, are still the cornerstones of our attempt to seek a better world.

We must not be so emerged in our desire to find practical solutions for temporary problems that we forget the most noble task of social and political thinking throughout the centuries: to try to enlighten our journey towards more justice and greater democracy.

The right of the people is the most enduring principle of social progress and those thinkers who have attempted to provide us with a better understanding of how to secure it have also had the greatest impact on the relationship between man and society.

Although our times are dominated by greater forces of change than ever before, I strongly believe that the new millennium will, just like previous centuries, be dominated by the everlasting search for justice and democracy. How to define them? How to achieve them? How to secure them?

Will the social sciences be worthy of that task? Or will our preoccupation with narrower visions prevent us from playing a constructive role in the advancement of mankind?

In that sense the new millennium will be the time of the classics, the time to reach for the fundamentals of social and political thinking in order to provide the essential understanding needed in the coming centuries of revolutionary change.