Social Theory & Human Reality

Social Theory and Human Reality.
London, Sage 2004

Yhteiskuntateoria ja inhimillinen todellisuus.
Helsinki, Gaudeamus 2007
The state of the art of social science?

- Esko Valtaoja: At Home in the Universe
- Stephen: A Brief History of Time
- Etc.

What about popular introductions to social science?

- There are introductions to sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.
- But they typically tell us about different theories, approaches, or schools of thought
The state of the art of social science?

- Even disagreements about what disciplines are counted within social science
  - Social sciences and humanities
  - Human sciences
  - Economics?
The objective of this course

- What the social sciences know about their object of research, the human reality, i.e. the state of the art
- Concentration on what we agree on; the shared paradigm
- A somewhat eclectic voice
Why talk about human reality?

• Why not "social reality," or "human society" or societies?
  – Admittedly social groups, or organizations such as nationstates, often serve as objects of social research
  – Yet the object cannot be defined that way
Why talk about human reality?

• “Social reality” implies that material objects are outside the scope of social science
• “Human reality” refers to the entire reality that we face and experience as human beings
  - It is not just words, ideas or interaction with other talking subjects; we are also living bodies coming to terms with natural and built environments
• Compare natural sciences: abstracts away from the influence of human subjects when analysing natural laws and processes
  - The same is not possible for the social sciences
Why talk about human reality?

- Anything humans experience can be approached from the viewpoint of the social sciences.
- However, social science is interested in the material reality only from certain perspectives:
  1. The material reality – or more precisely, the way it is conceived – sets conditions on human activities and social systems.
  2. Knowledge about the material reality is essential in the formation and daily reproduction of human reality.
Routines (or habits) as a scope

- Routines depict the tacit, culturally unconscious or ‘non-discursive’ aspect of reality
- They are the main stronghold of social order
- They are the secret behind the humans’ success in adapting to varying conditions
- Interplay between routines and reflexivity
- Social science explanations typically entail “reconstructing” the rationale behind routinized practices
Human Intellect and Adaptability

- Humans have been the most successful species in adapting to all kinds of environments
- Not due to the human body
  - The ability to protect our body and to make devices enables us to adapt
- Social and cultural adaptation is another component of human adaptability
  - Our almost unlimited ability to conceive of and organize our own or others’ lives in various ways
Human Intellect and Adaptability

• Is the superb intelligence of humans the secret?
  – Language has been seen as still another proof of human intellect

• The biological and cultural aspects of human adaptation
  – At birth a human brain weighs only 25 percent of its eventual adult weight
  – an individual’s nervous system is partially built according to guidelines provided by the local culture
 ➢ Nurture also affects nature (biology)
Human Intellect and Adaptability

- Yet the human brain’s capacity is not the key factor alone.
- The incredible adaptability and flexibility of humans is mainly due to culture and society.
- The human species’ “intelligence” cannot be properly located in the brain of any individual:
  - Individuals may invent, but implementation is a collective process.
  - Even as innovators we stand on the shoulders of others.
- We adapt to our environment by learning and passing on information to others, rather than by following behavioural patterns encoded in our genes.
- Institutions “think for us” (Douglas 1986) by orchestrating routinized practices.
Human Intellect and Adaptability

• What do we know by now about human reality, which accounts for humans’ incredible adaptability?
• By what means have humans have been so successful? How do human institutions function?
• Social scientists stress that all answers cannot be found in biology
Human Intellect and Adaptability

- Compared with natural science, how much progress has taken place within social science?
- Pervasively messy status: social scientists do not seem to agree on a single theory
- Are the social sciences poorly developed?
- However, the object itself – human reality – is extremely complex
- Human reality as a whole is the resource by which humans have been able to tackle the objects of natural science
  - The huge capacity of the human intellect is due to the complex nature of human culture and social life
Toward a Social Theory of Human Reality

- The common ground is composed of two main elements
  1. Habitual behaviour as a building block of society (although researchers may be more interested in individuals’ reflexive moments)
  2. Key role of language in conveying information, coordinating action, and forming human reality
- Yet scientists often deny that they share certain basic premises
The messy field of social science

• Unlike the natural sciences, the scientific community of social sciences does not subscribe to a paradigm (Kuhn 1970)
  – E.g. no unanimity over what sorts of entities the human reality contains

• Competing paradigms do not (often) offer different explanations for the same findings, but they find each others’ findings and observations irrelevant
The messy field of social science

- E.g. structural theorists interested in macro-level phenomena are not interested in micro-level interaction or in the semiotics of language
- Conversely, the latter may find macro-level theories simply uninteresting
- In discussion, often the argument is that the opponents have misunderstood the importance or ontological status of their findings
The messy field of social science

• For instance, structural theorists seldom protect themselves from a constructionist critique by presenting a competing “realist” theory of language
  – They argue that constructionists overemphasize the ideological impact of language
The messy field of social science

• Also, approaches deal with different levels of abstraction
  - Some may study “modern society”
  - Some aim at universally valid theories of human behaviour

• Writers are not always very clear about the level of abstraction at which they move
  - They may make points about a particular phenomenon, whereas their universal implications are implicit in the premises on which the arguments rest
Reasons for the messy state

• Different theorists often use different terms to refer to more or less the same concepts

• That is partly because in the social sciences language has more roles than in natural science

  1. It is always part of the object of study

  2. “Metalanguage” by which results are communicated
Reasons for the messy state

- The results have different effects on the object of research
  - Metalanguage concepts often become part of common property, folk theories and notions by which individuals interpret their own and others’ actions
  - Thus the concepts adopted by a community will become part of the object of social sciences – e.g. “alcoholism”
Reasons for the messy state

• Researchers are often more or less consciously partisans in the events they analyze in the first place
  – Often analyses about social phenomena have been inspired and mixed with different forms of critique about existing social arrangements
  – Social scientists may in fact, for their minor part, affect the human reality they scrutinize
The dilemma of the social sciences

- Human scientists tend to treat the concepts they make as natural objects
  - The same phenomenon that happens in social life (e.g. emission trade)
- Concepts meant to help analyze institutional action and its manifestations create their own world similar to nature
The postmodernist trap

• Since all concepts are social constructs, they are equally valid
  ➢ The only value of a social theory is its contribution to the notions and metaphors by which people act and think in social reality
  ➢ Question of validity is replaced by the question of ethics: is an intervention good or bad for human welfare

• Is there any difference between social science and literature or other arts?
Michel Foucalt’s Trihedron of Sciences (The Order of Things, p. 347)

Mathematical and physical sciences

Application of mathematics to these empirical sciences

Formalization of thought

The human sciences

Philosophies and ontologies of life, labour and language

Philosophical reflection

Sciences of language, life and the production and distribution of wealth (linguistics, biology and economics)
Science and the social sciences

- Obvious differences between natural and human sciences
- Yet natural science commonly used as the model of a positive social science
  - Objectivity
  - Preciseness of concepts
  - Accurate, consistent methods (mathematics, formal logic)
Science and the social sciences

• A ‘positivist’ solution:
  – Creation of a realistic and analytic metalanguage
  – Reduction of language to a merely instrumental role (cf. the original language before the tower of Babel)

• A more honest solution
  – Acknowledgement of the complexity of human reality
  – Acceptance of the findings we cannot deny or explain in other ways
    • The complex role of language and the constructed nature of human reality
    • Different ontological levels at which social sciences have gathered knowledge about social reality – local realities and universal findings