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Introduction to the Science of Social Sciences

Xia Yulong

Conditions for and significance of the establishment of the science of social sciences

As a new branch of learning, the science of sciences has had a history of 5 to 6 decades since it was first established in the 20's and 30's of this century. Although the science of sciences did not exclude the social sciences from its range of objects of study as delineated by J.D.Bernal, founder of the science of sciences, it has been regarded as almost equivalent to the science of natural sciences in the later actual development of this discipline. The social sciences as objects of study have nearly disappeared from the field of vision of researchers. Dating back to the establishment of classical political economics by the British scientist William Petty (1623-1687), modern social sciences have had a history of over 300 years. Of course, the different branches of the social sciences did not appear simultaneously, but they have all respectively explored the nature, structure and law of development of human society from different angles and perspectives. In a quite long period of time, however, the social sciences have not assumed the task of making a systematic study of themselves, and consequently little is known about their nature, structure and law of development as a special social phenomena.

The occurrence of the above phenomena has objective reasons, the most important being the backward state of the development of the social sciences as compared with the

natural sciences. Nonetheless, in the present situation, this phenomena no longer has any reason to continue its existence taking into consideration both subjective and objective conditions. The task of establishing the science of social sciences has entered into the agenda of social science research as a historical undertaking.

1.Conditions

It is safe to say that conditions for the establishment of the science of social sciences are basically ripe and will become more and more adequate.

(1)Modern society has evolved into a rapidly changing mega-system with a multi-factor, multi-level and complex structure and is increasingly becoming internationalized.

Modern society is based on social mass production, one of the features of which is the emergence of large enterprises. A large enterprise is here defined as a large-scale conglomerate which has sprung up during the 20th century. These large enterprises are actually self-sustaining "economic empires" with their branches distributed all over the world and their annual total sales usually amounting to several million or even dozens of million US dollars. With these large enterprises as keys at the core, hundreds and thousands of medium and small-size businesses are organized through specialization and sub-contracting to form colossal conglomerates. Modern social mass production requires continued construction of modern large projects, as large scale modern water conservancy works, regional power supply projects, super high-rising architectural complexes, etc.. These large projects not only involve enormous sums of investment and a large labour force, but also must take into consideration very complicated internal and external factors and conditions. Modern societal mass production must have the precondition of a developed commodity economy and market system. Being one single link in a modern economy, production must be coordinated with other links such as financing, research

and development, communications, transportation, commercial circulation and market services in order to form a favourable economic circle. A modern economy is the parent system to modern production and at the same time it is also but a subsystem of modern society as a whole. Modern economic activities are carried out in a complex "Social Field", which is subject to the change of the various social factors such as politics, culture, science and technology, education, population and ecological environment. All of these factors will inevitably alter the intensity of the "social field" and thus affect progress of the development of the economy. On the other hand, the social field and the progress of the development in their turn will also affect these factors.

Modern society not only is such a highly complicated mega-system with multi-levels, it is also rapidly changing with an ever increasing pace of advancement. In such a dynamic mega-system, different kinds of factors are interwoven, and therefore the change of any one single link will have a great impact on the various fields of the society. The influence of a certain change in a region or a country may spread to the whole world. For example, the devaluation of US dollars in 1987 has greatly affected the world economy.

Integration and systematization of modern society inevitably requires the development of the social sciences, which explores the nature, structure and law of development of human society, toward integration and systematization, and at the same time provides an objective base for the establishment of the science of social sciences.

(2) As a special social phenomena, social sciences has formed a system of knowledge and organizational structure of its own.

During the 20th century, especially since the Second World War, social sciences have seen a rapid development. A series of disciplines have emerged dealing with the various aspects of social characteristics and social life of mankind,

including economics which studies the means of production of mankind, political science which studies power relationships, the science of law and ethics which studies human behavioral norms, sociology which studies human groups, ethnology and cultural anthropology which investigates the cultural phenomena of mankind, the science of history which studies the developmental process and historical trajectory of mankind, psychology which explores human emotions and will, and geography which studies the human environment, etc. Parallel to the continued development of basic disciplines, the proportion of applied disciplines has apparently increased. A number of new disciplines of an applied nature, such as management science, forecasting science and information science, have sprung up. A large number of sub-disciplines have been ramified from traditional (conventional) disciplines. In border areas between traditional disciplines there have emerged a great number of interdisciplinary concerns of study, thus linking those traditional disciplines which used to be separated and independent. The emergence of some comprehensive disciplines, which choose particular societal objects as the object of study and apply multi-disciplinary theory and methods to their investigation, such as urban ecology, the study of talent, and study of adolescence, has further changed the state of separation between disciplines. The above situation indicates that the field of social sciences with its present state of development is no longer a loose aggregate of a number of mutually separated and fragmented disciplines, but has formed a system of knowledge with a certain structure and internal relationship of its own.

Moreover, social science research has also assumed a rather large scale of development and has become an important sector in society. After experiencing the stage of individual research and that of collective research, social science research work was extended to a national scale and international scale during the Second World War and

afterwards. Social science foundations, research institutions and centres have been set up in many countries together with complete library and information service systems, various learned societies and consultative and service organizations, thus creating a network structure for the generation of social science knowledge. This network structure may be termed the social knowledge industry. All of these signify that social science research has been institutionalized and has become an important constituent part of the tertiary industry. Moreover the international relationship among social science communities is increasingly enhanced. International academic organizations for the various disciplines have been set up in succession. Various international academic conferences, exchanging visits of scholars between different countries, and international joint research projects on various subjects, are being organized with increasing frequency. There have also appeared comprehensive international organizations of a social science nature, i.e. the Social Science Division of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Council of UNESCO.

Systematization of the social sciences and institutionalization of social science research have created a direct prerequisite for the establishment of the science of social sciences.

(3) Since the 1930s of this century, some scholars, who made an overall study of the social sciences, have accumulated certain research results and have thus prepared (some) material for the establishment of the science of social sciences. (This will be specifically expounded upon in the next section.)

2. Significance

Then, what is the significance of establishing the science of social sciences?

(1) Enhancement of the self-consciousness of social sciences.

The road of development of the social sciences has always been rough and bumpy. They have encountered far stronger external pressure and many more obstacles than natural sciences. This has been the case both in China and abroad, and in ancient times as well as at present without any exception. These frustrations and complications must find their expressions in the subjective ideology (consciousness) of the social science workers and create psychological sediments and impediments. At this critical moment of development, reform and opening in China, a new breakthrough in social science theory is desperately needed to guide the reform practice to tide over difficulties and march towards the magnificent goal of the construction of modernization. Therefore, it is very urgent and necessary for social science workers to become deeply aware of the historical mission they have undertaken, to break through obstacles, to emancipate ideas, to go deep into the realities of social life and to be bold in making explorations. For this aim, it is necessary to make deep reflections on the road of the development of social sciences (including its embryonic stage) during the distant thousand years, the most recent hundred years and especially the 150 years in China since the Opium War, the 70 years since the May 4th Movement and the 40 years since the founding of new China, so that the self-consciousness of the social sciences can be enhanced through a summing up of experiences and lessons and by probing into their law of development and trends. With this self-consciousness, social science workers will be more conscientious in performing social science research work, teaching and communicating social science results. Proceeding from the status quo and developmental trends of present society and social sciences, they will decide on their main direction of attack according to their own special qualities, adjust their structure of knowledge and improve learning and research methods in order to meet the requirements of the

times. The establishment of the science of social sciences is aimed at just enhancing this self-consciousness of social sciences, which is a process as well as a result.

(2) Help the society correctly evaluate the social function of social sciences.

For many years the social science community has been complaining that social sciences are not treated justly in the society and have not been given an appropriate position, and it eagerly demands that society, especially leaders of the party and the state, attach importance to the function and role of social sciences. It is, of course, reasonable that operating funds for social sciences ought to be less than those for natural sciences. But the actual situation is that the difference in operating funds for these two different sets of institutions is not of one order of magnitude but of two orders. In the minds of some people, there is a question mark as regards to the validity of social sciences as sciences. Social sciences are not categorized and treated as an integral part of the whole of science, but as a branch of general cultural and propaganda undertaking. The social sciences are not required first to make research and to try to provide a theoretical basis for decision-making by the party and the government on strategy, planning, guidelines and policy. The common practice is first for the government and party to make decisions and then the social sciences are required to annotate and justify the decisions which have been made. The function of evaluating the decisions afterwards by the social sciences is all the more neglected and is therefore very hard to perform. It is true that there are many in society who attach importance to social science work, but some of them do not really understand the nature and function of the social sciences. They do not understand that the application of social science theories to social practice must undergo such processes as basic research, applied research and developmental research, and that the ways of functioning are different for different

disciplines and researches are of a different nature, and that there can be short-term effects as well as long-term effects. Without understanding that different research institutions have different natures and different functions and that they divide labour between themselves but at the same time are interrelated, people will tend to put unpractical requirements on the social sciences. Some government agencies are not willing to supply social science workers with necessary information and material. Some even block the passage of information, for fear that this will cause them trouble or "make a blunder". All of these prove that, in order to promote the cause of social science development, the social science community should assume the task of (explaining and propagating to) the society and leaders in addition to enhancing its self-consciousness, so that the society and its leaders may have a correct assessment of the social function of social sciences. This is just another important significance of establishing the science of social sciences.

(3) Provide theoretical foundations for a social science developmental strategy, plan, guidelines and policy, and for the enhancement of social science management.

Although the guiding philosophy of China's social sciences—Marxism—is advanced, there are still rather large gaps in many particular disciplinary areas as compared with developed capitalist countries. The reasons for this can be attributed to the low degree of China's social development, inadequate information resources, backwardness of information technology and lack of modern research facilities. From a subjective point of view, the lack of perfection in management must be regarded as one of the important reasons. In order to speed up the development of social sciences and put into full play its guiding role in China's construction and reform practice, it is thus imperative to strengthen the management of social sciences including macro as well as micro management. In macro management, we must solve these

problems: How do we make developmental strategy and plan for social sciences? How can we optimize the disciplinary structure by selectively strengthening some traditional disciplines and at the same time develop new disciplines? How can we create a good macro environment for the flourishing of social science research? How can we set up a social science research system which complies with China's characteristics? How can we rationally allocate the various factors of social science research capacity? How can we improve social science research methodology? How can we fully motivate the initiative and creativity of the researchers according to the special characteristics of social science research work? How can we continuously upgrade the quality of social science workers according to the requirements of the time?..... In micro management, we must answer these questions: How can we strengthen management on the organization of social science research? What kind of leadership system should be adopted? How can we enhance the relationship of the organization of social science research with society? How can we fully develop and use social science information resources? How can we properly handle the proportion between basic research, applied research and developmental research, and the relationship between research and teaching according to the different patterns of organization of social science research?..... Correct decision-making and proper treatment of the above problems can not be realized without the guidance of scientific theories. A major constituent part of such scientific theory is the science of social sciences.

(4) Helpful to all-dimensional development of the science of sciences.

The establishment of the science of social sciences is the requirement for further extension and deepening of the research of the science of sciences. In my article "On all-dimensional study of the science of sciences" written in 1985 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the publication

of the journal *The Science of Sciences & Science and Technology Management*, I expounded the significance of this undertaking: "Has not the research field of the science of sciences been expanded rather wide? Why should some one put forward the question of all-dimensional study? The reason for putting forth the question is the object of study of the science of sciences has been neglected to a large aspect. This is social sciences. The 'science' we usually talk about denotes the natural sciences (including technology). The social sciences are not included in its denotation. The science of sciences studies the natural sciences as a social phenomena, but has not investigated the social sciences (and social engineering from the same angle). This has made the research of the science of sciences seem more or less 'lame'."

It is only after the establishment of the science of social sciences, that the "lame" state of research of the science of sciences can be altered, and further generalizations of both the social sciences and natural sciences can be realized, thus developing a general science of sciences with more complete coverage.

The present state of the overall study of social sciences abroad and at home.

Since the 1930s of this century, especially since the Second World War, there has been a quite rapid increase of publications on the overall study of social sciences abroad and at home. These publications are mostly articles and papers. Monographs are very rare. Here we only intend to give an outline introduction to the state of research in this aspect.

1. Nature

The paramount question is: Is the study of society a branch of science? This is a question of long dispute in capitalist countries. The social science research field has long been entrenched by a subjective philosophy due to the fact that the object of study of social sciences is humans with a