Эпистемология и философия науки
2024. Т. 61. № 2. С. 190–208
УДК 167.7

Epistemology & Philosophy of Science
2024, vol. 61, no. 2, pp. 190–208
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5840/eps202461233

Social Science as a Project: Epistemological Consequence of Changing Contexts for Social Science Research

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It is increasingly common to conceive of scientific research as something that can be planned, managed, and assessed by applying modern techniques of project management. Expecting research to follow certain standardized procedures to achieve clearly defined goals has a long tradition, in particular, in the natural sciences and has arguably contributed to the acceptance of science as an authoritative force that makes tangible contributions to social progress. For the social sciences, however such a narrow understanding of scientific research causes serious problems. Social science research doesn't always fit in the logic of project management. Moreover, attempts to adjust research practices to correspond with external, managerial experiences are far more consequential and damaging to the social sciences. This article interrogates the prospects and consequences of project thinking in the social sciences and discusses the likely epistemological consequences. To do so, it will recapitulate the historical and social developments that lead to the adoption of managerial principles in social science research and contrasts them with the philosophical principles that underpinned the scientification of thinking about the social.

Keywords: Social Epistemology, Academic Capitalism, Scientific Progress, Value Free Science, Scientific Ethos

Социальная наука как проект: эпистемологические последствия изменения контекстов социально-научных исследований

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Все более распространенным становится представление о научных исследованиях как о чем-то, что можно планировать и оценивать, чем можно управлять при помощи современных методов управления проектами. Ожидание, что исследования будут следовать определенным стандартизированным процедурам для достижения конкретных целей, имеет давнюю традицию, в частности, в естественных науках. Возможно, оно способствовало признанию науки как авторитетной силы, вносящей ощутимый вклад в социальный прогресс. Однако для социальных наук такое узкое понимание научных исследований вызывает серьезные проблемы. Исследования в области социальных наук не всегда вписываются в логику

управления проектами. Более того, попытки привести исследовательскую практику в соответствие с внешним управленческим опытом имеют гораздо более серьезные последствия и вредят социальным наукам. В этой статье исследуются перспективы и последствия проектного мышления в социальных науках и обсуждаются вероятные эпистемологические последствия. Для этого будут охарактеризованы исторические и социальные события, которые привели к принятию управленческих принципов в исследованиях в области социальных наук. Они будут противопоставлены философским принципам, лежащим в основе научности мышления о социальном.

Ключевые слова: социальная эпистемология, академический капитализм, научный прогресс, свободная от ценностей наука, научный этос

Introduction

"Theme: theory of society; duration: 30 years; costs: none"

When German Sociologist Niklas Luhmann gave this famous answer [Lee, 2000, p. 320] to the question about his research "project", the German and European academic systems looked distinctively different from today. Despite sounding "odd" today, Luhmann's answer exemplifies the widespread contempt held by many social scientists for attempts to "manage" science and to try to turn research activities into something that can be measured, quantified, standardized or in other words: thought of as a project.

The social scientists of the 1960's and 70's set themselves apart from their colleagues in the natural and applied sciences who had for quite some time adopted a more managerial approach to their daily work. Conceived of as an intellectual rather than a scientific undertaking research in the social science and humanities was less like to be assessed in terms of "applicability", nor were social scientists to produce tangible "outcomes" in the form of patents or products. However, in the past decades, shrinking budgets and the rise of principles of "New Public Management" have put the question of how social science research can be made to fit in a wider understanding of research as project management on the agenda. Changes to the social and in institutional environment in which research is conducted increasingly favor "project-like" inquiries: research activities should lead to predictable "outcomes" such as publications and grant proposals, and investment in research should correspond with specific benefits such as gains in individual and institutional prestige, citations or third party funding.

The adoption of managerial principles and the focus on "output" are impacting how research is evaluated and valued increasingly shifting the emphasize to tangible, applicable and measurable research that adheres to external criteria and is open to steering and assessment. The social

sciences and humanities are thus "catching up" with developments that have transformed the natural science for two centuries: Since the late 18th century and since 20th century natural science development was heavily influenced by state-sponsored and politically driven "Megaprojects" [Kasavin, 2017, 8ff] and guided by the idea of "big science" as a strategic, national resource [McLauchlan and Hooks, 1995]. Likewise, technological advancements, discoveries and applicable products were increasingly accepted as suitable standards for measuring the success and usefulness of scholarly inquiry. The social sciences in contrast had long withstood this trend. Despite the dreams of positivists such as August Comte, who envisioned a "social physics" (1844), the social sciences, hadn't "gone big" nor could scholarly debate be reduced to concrete "outcomes" of research endeavors.

In recent years, however, the context of social science research has changed rather dramatically. Scholars in the fields of sociology, economics, anthropology, or political science eagerly outline their highly specific research objectives, provide detailed timelines of their (intended) research, define "milestones", and assign budgets, in sum proudly describing their respective projects. Rather than aspiring to understand societies and dedicating whole careers to that one cause, modern social scientists are more concerned with adding to already impressive publication lists and demonstrating their skills as managers of international research projects.

This contribution will touch briefly upon the developments that brought about this change in context, (self) image and objective of social science research. It doesn't aim to contribute to the already existing and highly informative literature on the political and social circumstances that caused that shift – most notably the instructive work on the impact of neoliberal ideas on the academic sector [Mirowski, 2011; Jessop, 2018] and the rise of managerialism in science [Ginsberg, 2011; Fleming, 2021] – but rather to focus on the epistemological and teleological consequences of the shift towards project-style social science research.

We will first revisit the understanding of the character and purpose of social science. Then we turn to the question of what exactly denotes a "project" and contrasts a working definition with the understanding of the prerequisites and practicalities of social science research. The subsequent third section will focus on the epistemological and teleological tensions and problems stemming from the contradiction between an internal "scientific ethos" and external expectations on social science. The contribution will then argue that the "projectificaton" of the social sciences shouldn't be conceived as an indicator for a revival and expansion of big science or a social science variant of "megaproject"-science. We rather experience the emergence of many "little sciences" [DeSolla Price, 1963], which can alter the epistemological basis and damage the critical abilities of social science research.

Coloring the ways of thought – Social Sciences between Explaining and Understanding

For the British Mathematician and Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, science was surely not a project. Nor did he belief that the rise of scientific thinking in early modern Europe could be reduced to a series of spectacular discoveries and technological breakthroughs. In his seminal book *Science and the Modern World* Whitehead explains the triumph of science and its contribution to "modernizing" Europe with the emergence and spread of a "new mentality", a "new coloring of the ways of thought" [1925, p. 2]. Science was possible because people developed new (or rediscovered old) perspectives on and explanations for the world they live in. Moreover, these new "ways of thought" were built on a believe in the "existence of an Order of Things" [Ibid.] that was accessible and intelligible. Whitehead was interested in the developments in natural philosophy and modern scientific thought that paved the way for the evolution and was mainly concerned with explaining the evolution of the natural sciences as dominant ways of reasoning and authoritative forces in social life. Even though he was less concerned with the social sciences, the scientific "way of thought" affected the thinking about social phenomena too. In particular the idea that social worlds are ordered and thus intelligible had a major impact on early social scientific thought.

The in principle intelligibility doesn't imply an immediate connection between the natural order and an observer though. nor can we assume that valid operations for establishing true knowledge exist. As Michael Polanyi has pointed out the order of things is never present in its entirety but only as a "problem (…) presenting itself to the mind" [Polanyi, 1964, p. 23]. A specific problem (that is an open question that gained for some reason, or another gained subjective importance) then provokes a "collection of clues" [Ibid.] and "culminates in the guess of a definite solution" [Ibid., p. 24]. This depiction corresponds closely with Whitehead's description of the methodological approach in the (natural) sciences:

> The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation [Whitehead, 1929, p. 5].

Research is presented as a sequence of "passages" from observations to explanation, with every arrival setting the scene for another departure. As we will see in the following, this depiction of research, albeit a simplified and incomplete representation of Whiteheads and Polanyi's thinking,

indicates why it is so tempting to conceive of scientific research as a series of projects.

The fowling section will outline the dominant understanding of what projects *are* and explains how this definition relates to the praxis of scientific research. Moreover, it will be shown that the particularities of many problems that "present themselves" to the natural scientists invite project thinking since their solution is not only of academic but of very practical interest.

Once the connection between (applied) natural science research and project thinking is established, we can ask whether a similar relationship exists with the social sciences. Furthermore, we can turn to the epistemological and teleological consequences of doing projects in the social sciences.

These questions are particularly important, since the social sciences were influenced and shaped by fundamental disagreements about teleological, epistemological and methodological questions.

For August Comte, for instance, the social sciences should follow the path of the natural science disciplines. Moreover, for him the ultimate vanishing point of any inquiry into the social was the development of a "social physics" which he understood as the "science which occupies itself with social phenomena, considered in the same light as astronomical, physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena, that is to say as being subject to natural and invariable laws of discovery of which is the special object of its researches establishment" [Comte cited after Iggers 1959, p. 434]. Comte's vision of a social physics might not have been fulfilled (and might well be out of reach entirely). Nevertheless, positive philosophy and the aspiration to find valid *explanations* for social phenomena has preserved and, in some disciplines, (like as economics) prevailed.

However, ever since the inception of the social science, the epistemic aim to explain social phenomena has been contested. Max Weber, a founding figure of German Sociology for instance rejected the idea that the social science could develop along the same lines as the natural sciences. For him any "objective analysis of cultural events which proceeds according to the thesis that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality to "laws" is meaningless. [It is meaningless] because the knowledge of social laws is not knowledge of social reality but is rather one of the various aids used by our minds for attending this end" [Weber 1904/1949, p. 72]. Weber points to a fundamental difference between the social and natural sciences, stemming from the distinct objects of study: "Where natural phenomena can only be explained in terms of the systematic regularities they exhibit, social phenomena can be understood in a special wat, since social scientists can, at least in principle, communicate with the people whom they study (…)" [Moon, 1977, p. 183]. The distinction between natural and social sciences can be further

illustrated by contrasting "idealistic" and "positivistic" positions. Positivists insist that "adequate accounts of all empirical phenomena must take the form of explanations in the natural sciences, to wit, subsumption under general laws or regularities" [Moon, 1977, p. 184]. In consequence, all research follows more or less the same "template" that is the formulation of research questions for which adequate research designs have to be developed, which then can be confronted with suitable data. As we will see below, this formalistic understanding of the research process, albeit disputable, renders research compatible with project thinking and project management techniques. However, idealistic positions, hold that "the natural and the social sciences are entirely distinct" [Ibid.] and that the social sciences can never arrive at "explanations of social phenomena in the sense that we have explanations of natural phenomena" [Ibid.]. From this perspective, social science research should be conceived of as a reflexive process that (sometimes) involves dialogue with the object of study and aims at "grasping the meaning of human action" [Ibid.]. This means, that it is questionable whether research of this kind *can* be made to "fit" the description of projects and thus contemporary understandings of manageable research. However, even more important is the question, whether social science research *should* take the form of (consecutive) projects. The first aspect mainly concerns the organization of scientific research and thus touches upon debates about the autonomy of science and the ability of scientific community to plan, assess and advance their research independently of external expectations. The second aspect speaks directly to the aims and means of scientific research and thus the self-images and identities of social scientists.

This contribution is interested in the latter aspect. To assess if and how project thinking affects the core of the social sciences it is important to ask first what projects are.

What is a Project?

The methodical approach of scientific research, that starts from a specific problem, follows a predefined course and (ideally) arrives at a justifiable explanation predestine it to being describe as a research "project". The etymological origin of the term is the Medieval Latin *proiectum* translates as "something thrown forward". Accordingly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a "project" as "planned undertaking such as a definitely formulated piece of research" (Merriam Webester Online). Project management literature describes a s project as "a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result" [Schwalbe, 2015, p. 4] and define specific attributes of projects: Projects have a unique purpose (thus differentiating between "project" and "normal" work), are temporary (this

means a clear "endpoint" can be defined), require specific resources and normally have "primary customers or sponsor" [Schwalbe, 2015, p. 5]. Overall projects can be understood as a confined context, in which specific goals should be achieved. Goal attainment in turn is supported by "tailored" processes (the "project design") and the deployment of defined resources (for instance work hours, machinery, or money).

It is easy to understand that this depiction of projects bears some semblance with natural science research. The problems that present themselves to the curious eye of natural scientists demand a solution, or in other words, provide the researcher with a specific purpose. Not all questions can be answered in a project-like manner though. It is very difficult to lay out a temporal research design for answering specific, yet comprehensive questions, such as the search for a unified theory in physics. Moreover, such generational tasks often require a vast number of resources without being able to deliver for specific customers or sponsors. Yet, despite the fact that not all natural science research can be project-like, it is evident that many research endeavors in the natural sciences can be conceived of and in fact have been organized and administered as projects.

Especially applied research has been instrumental for and instrumentalized by actors outside the field of science. As a driving force behind technological progress, it is not surprising that political and economic actors have tried to utilize scientific research from the natural sciences. This utilization in turn, imposed specific managerial logics and understandings of political and economic "projects" on research activities that were increasingly dependent on external financing and tailored towards non-academic ends.

Furthermore, despite the affinity (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) between (applied) natural science research and project thinking, conceiving of research as a project is – to an extent – a breach of historical (self)conceptions of science. Lorraine Daston describes the taking shape of modern scientific practices as a gradual development. "Observation", a cornerstone of any scientific inquiry, for instance, "had been understood as a collective, as the slow accumulation of anonymous observations over generations, centuries even millennia" [Daston, 2010, p. 87]. Whiteheads new "coloring of the ways of though" thus emerged gradually, produced by the dialogue between peers who slowly developed standards of doing, presenting, and debating science [Ibid., p. 91ff]. These dialogues were distinctively not directed at creating "a unique product, service or result" [Schwalbe, 2015] but rather at establishing a new, intersubjectively intelligible "way of reasoning" [Daston, 2010, p. 104] that distinguish scientific knowledge from any form of knowing.

Science, Progress and Utility

It goes without saying that this new way of reasoning involved planning, the application of carefully crafted methods and aimed at producing specific results. Scientific research is thus not categorically incompatible (and in fact often heavily relying on) the application of standardized, manageable processes, for instance the systematic collection of "data", the designing, conducting and repetition of experiments and the presentation of findings and interpretations in an agreeable, standardized manner [Daston, 2010, p. 99–100].

However, a closer look shows that the simple equation of research ventures and manageable projects stems from the inappropriate generalization of experiences, techniques and conventions in a narrow subfield of scientific inquiry: applied research. The nature of social sciences, the specific characteristics of their object of study and their intellectual traditions set them apart from applied research and thus limit the ways in which project thinking can be applied to them.

To understand the implications of these differences, it is important to take a closer look at the "symbiotic relationship" [McLauchlan and Hooks, 1995, p. 749] between science and the non-scientific actors and reconstruct how project thinking could become the dominant mode of "doing science".

The notion of scientific projects that fit the above-mentioned description is often associated with the emergence of so-called "big science" and "big technology" in the mid- 20th century. However, as Ilya Kasavin has shown, science and technological development had been made a "state priority" already two centuries prior. In Pertine Russia science was systematically utilized to address strategic concerns of the state (for instance military capabilities or economic infrastructure) culminating in the planning and conduct of "megaprojects" that relied heavily on scientific-technological knowledge [Kasavin, 2017, p. 8–10]. Scientific knowledge thus became a mere"component" of political and economic undertakings. The ability to contribute to social projects shaped the relation between science, politics and economics and transformed the criteria for assessing the success of research activities. For instance, as Piero Del Negro has shown for 18th century Italy, researchers were expected to solving specific problems and to contribute to progress in key areas such as navigation or naval architecture [Del Negro, 2006, p. 177] that would support political ambition and economic needs of the time.

The orientation towards expectations and needs that originate outside of academic circles do not need to pose a fundamental problem for scientific research. Writing in the 1960s Harvey Brooks, for instance, argued that against a simple and simplifying distinction between "basic research",

driven by scientific curiosity and "applied research" which is mainly motivated by the utility of its findings:

> The fact that research is basic does not mean that the results lack utility, but only that utility is not the primary factor in the choice of direction for each successive step. The general field in which a scientist chooses or is assigned to work may be influenced by possible or probable applicability, even though the detailed choices of direction may be governed wholly by internal scientific criteria [Brooks, 1967, p. 1706].

At first glance Brooks assertion t seems to reassure that external expectations and modes of doing research do not necessarily clash with scientific principles and practices.

Moreover, he is keenly aware of internal constraints imposed on individual researchers by their respective scientific community which limit their freedom to choose problems and the general direction of their work. This soft power of professional communities, the rules of the game and tacit assumption about respectable, promising and appropriate research thus contribute to a structuration and homogenization of research activities within fields and disciplines:

> Although scientists like to emphasize that fundamental research is "free", it is, actually, in another sense, a highly disciplined activity. The discipline is provided by the scientific "community" to which the research is related. His [sic!] choice of problem and direction if heavily conditioned by the social sanctions of this community, the requirements of originality, and scrupulous reference to related and contributing work of others [Ibid., p. 1707].

Brooks argues that in "applied research the individual is subject to somewhat different constraints, but not necessarily more severe" [Ibid.]. Moreover, he emphasized that external constraints are more visible than internal ones, which are not even "consciously view[ed] as constraints" [Ibid.]. However, Brooks depicts the problem in mere "technical terms". It is certainly true that even the most basic and free research must adhere to *some* rules. In contrast to external expectations and logics, these internal rules, represent more much than practical guidance for the selection of problems and the conduct of research. In the famous formulation of Robert K. Merton, they constitute the "normative structure of science" [Merton [1942] 1973] itself, and thus uphold certain practices and a specific *scientific ethos*.

In contrast to Brooks, Merton was more skeptical about the impact of social "obligations and interests" [Ibid., p. 268] on the science and was thus concerned with four institutional imperatives which he considered prerequisites for maintain a scientific ethos.

For Merton institutionalized science must be organized around four principles: Universalism, communism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism [Ibid., p. 270].

The principle of universalism, which refers to the norm that "truth-claims, whatever their source, are to be subjected to preestablished impersonal criteria" emphasizes the priority of scientific practices. Likewise, the norm of "organized skepticism" that demands that all knowledge claims should be publicly scrutinized highlights the particularity of the scientific method and in consequence institutionalized science. For the question at hand, both norms are unproblematic since they are not directly related to the *form* of scientific research. That doesn't apply for the other two norms though.

For Merton, "communism" is an integral element of the scientific ethos. The norm refers to the "common ownership of goods" and rests on the assumption that "substantiative findings of science are a product of social collaboration and are assigned to the community" [Merton, [1942] 1973, p. 273]. Project-like research, when commissioned by external clients *could* violate this norm, especially when they include non-disclosure agreements, transfer of rights or other forms of exclusive use of the "products" of scientific research.

Even more problematic is the fourth and final norm: disinterestedness. Disinterestedness is not the same as altruism or an "*L'art pour l'art"* attitude of aloof intellectuals, nor should it be conflated with more positive, romantic notions of a virtuous "passion for knowledge" [Merton, [1942], 1973]. Disinterestedness should rather be understood as an expression of a "distinctive pattern of institutional control" that prevents scientists from putting personal motives and direct immediate advantages (although they may still play a role) ahead of the public character of science [Ibid.]. In other words, scientists should not work for their own "self-aggrandizement" [Ibid.] but for the sake of science as a collective and public undertaking. This norm is difficult to adhere to in any case, think for example of the often-fierce competition among scientists for positions, prestige and funding. It is even less likely to be followed when problems, approaches and aims of scientific research are derived from external demands and made to fit manageable project logics.

Merton's description of the scientific ethos as a conglomerate of norms that ensure that institutionalized science can function within, but also distinct from society potentially put the scientific endeavor at odds with a project-logic that demands an orientation towards the exclusive needs of clients and tie the research interest solely to external factors. The constraints put on science by external expectation might not be more "severe" as Harvey Brooks put it, but they are qualitatively different and can clash with the normative structure underlying scientific research.

This is true for all scientific disciplines and constitutes a demarcation criterion that sets scientists apart from other professional groups. However, the scientific ethos is an "ideal", that is hard to live up to, often contested and potentially impractical to uphold in light of specific expectations and demands researchers are confronted with. These external

expectations are even more difficult to navigate when the immediate value and the utility of research are not clear. For this reason, n the following paragraphs we will take a closer look at the social sciences. As relatively young disciplines and specialization, the social sciences have struggled to establish themselves as scientific ventures [Iggers, 1959; Stichweh, 1992]. Moreover, the orientation towards external expectations and the adoption of project (management) logics not only create possible conflicts for an already fragile scientific ethos of social science but poses additional epistemological obstacles that can threaten the aim and purpose of the social sciences.

Projects in Social Science – Social Science as a Project

The emergence and evolution of modern science was driven by the intertwined ambitions to improve our understanding of nature and to contribute to the "improvement" of the living conditions of people. This amalgam of intellectual curiosity and pragmatism led to transformative scientific discoveries and unprecedented technological and social progress. Despite its dark sides – the development of ever more powerful weapons, environmental degradation and pollution or the scientific underpinning of authoritarian, fascist ideology by theories of eugenics, to name just a few – the apparent success story of science that delivered tangible improvements for people helped creating and maintaining a specific authority of science first in Western countries and later around the Globe.

The social science, on the other hadn, have struggled to make tangible contributions to societies ever since they came into being as "sciences" in the 19th century. This lack of concrete contributions is not an expression of their limited capacity but reflects a fundamental tension within the social sciences about their purpose, methods, and status in society. These tensions cut across disciplinary and thematic communities and have affected the internal structuring of disciplines and schools [Stichweh, 1992]: While some emphasize the "social" character of the social sciences and embrace an openly normative mission to contribute to the betterment of the human societies and to "take sides" in political disputes, others conceive of themselves more as neutral objective "scientists". From this perspective, social scientists should refrain from engaging directly in social debate and focus on the production of value-free research, descriptive data and contextual knowledge that can "inform" publics and decision-makers in the same way that natural science research can be conceived of as a "resource" for social debate [Adorno et al., 1969; Black, 2013]. While these tension are present in all social science disciplines, some are predominantly leaning towards the first

or the second interpretation. Some disciplines, for instance, psychology or economics are more oriented towards making tangible contributions to societies and conceive of themselves as quasi-natural sciences of human behavior [Giorgi, 2000; Mirowski, 2002]. Other disciplines, for instance anthropology or sociology lack such a clear orientation and are characterized (and thrive of) internal debate about fundamental questions about their purpose and principles.

Moreover, it can be argued that these debates (or the absence of them) are a symptom of an unresolved conflict that reflects the specific socio-historical conditions in which social sciences came into being. As "inventions" of 19th century Europe, the social sciences emerged in an intellectual climate that was characterized by two main fault lines. First, the believe that rationalization was a viable path to complete the enlightenment project. Scientific methods, the standardization of observation and experimentation and the application of these principles to ever more aspects of society were seen as key elements of social improvements and progress. However, at the same time, Europe was torn by growing political and ideological conflict. Especially the dark sides of the rationalization of life, growing inequality, the destruction of traditional, solidaric communities, the loss of power of traditional elites and the rise of a new economic ruling class, sparked fierce political disputes.

Against this background, early social scientists had to navigate between demands to contribute to a rational, objective understanding of society *and* calls for a clear positioning in increasingly bitter political disputes. It has been argued that the social sciences – and its philosophical predecessors from Plato and Aristotle to Voltaire and Marx – "have developed as an offshoot of reformist striving" to improve societies and to "take sides" in conflicts [Andreski, 1972, p. 144]. However, not only have social scientist always disagreed about whether and how societies could be improved [Ibid., 145], but concepts and ideologies, means and strategies to achieve such "improvements" have been primary objects of social science research. Moreover, social scientists have always been argued about how to balance these competing goals. Some theorists, most notably critical theorists of the Frankfurt school have made the second goal not only the core of their thinking but the reason d´etre of social theory and social research: For Max Horkheimer, for instance, the ultimate goal of critical theory was to "liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" [Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244].

This clearly stated normative goal of the social sciences convinced Horkheimer, that social scientists have to keep their distance from the powers to be. The normative alliance with neo-Marxist thinkers, the new exploited consumer classes and victims of a capitalist order, shouldn't not be achieved by working directly for their organizations and institutions. Rather than answering "customers" or "sponsors" directly, social scientist may share a perspective, passion or conviction but stay clear of being

in service of social and political actors. Moreover, "liberating" human beings cannot be achieved by producing distinct results or "outcomes" but involves active contribution to political debate, to criticize dominant ideas and to expose the often hidden, tacitly accepted or even convenient aspects of social orders that "enslave them". This means that social scientists have to criticize the actors and groups they sympathize with. Their research should challenge established views and advance debate and understanding. It should be conceived of not as a finished "product" but an ongoing contribution.

Finally, the rise of project-like research in social science and its acceptance by the research community is itself an expression of distinct social contexts. Herbert Marcuse, for instance, was convinced that the social science *must* develop critical capacities, since inequality and oppression can take place within political and economic structures that are agreeable, rational and even convenient. For him, critical, independent social science research is especially needed when and where "a comfortable, smooth, reasonable democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization" [1964/2001, p. 3]. From this perspective Merton's scientific norms, in particular scientific communism and the norm of disinterestedness are of paramount importance. The sharing of concepts, methods and findings is not only an essential part of good scientific practice but a *condicio sine qua non* for disciplines which should keep their distance from the social circumstances (*Soziale Verhältnisse*) they seek to understand. Moreover, the acceptance of external logics of how research should be conducted, and the potential aligning of research and professional, political, or economic interests lead to the clouding of our vision on reasonable unfreedoms and other "social bads" [Musgrave, 1974].

For all but positivist social sciences the already considerable problem of adopting external "project logics" is even bigger than in the natural sciences, since it not only creates methodological and normative but also epistemological challenges. Projects are designed to answer specific questions, meet the expectations of "clients" and follow relatively tight schedules. None of these criteria for project-like research can be met easily in the social science.

For illustrative purposes, lets focus on the first dimension: External "demand" for social science research often focuses on specific aspect of wider, often unanswerable problems. Social science projects that, aim at contributing to "better" educational policies face the problem, that concepts like "education" or "educational success" need to be discussed against the background of wider, often contested debates about the roots and dynamics of social inequalities, tensions between "individual achievements" and "structural constraints" and the role of socialization and social capital to name just a few. This means that projects must rely on specific definitions and intellectual traditions on what should *count* as education and what should *count* as success. Likewise, research design

inevitably has to operate on some assumption about inequality (for instance in order to identify "structural variables" that can affect educational policies) or individual agency in social contexts (to determine individual variables to measure incentives). Surely, social scientists can and do design "projects" like these. However, studies designed this way are normally scrutinized within the scientific community along two dimensions: First, the normative assumption of research design will be scrutinized and criticized if the chosen design is likely to confirm preferred normative positions rather than providing a comprehensive analysis. Second, the findings of such a project would then be contextualized and compared with other research in the field. In contrast to the natural sciences, this would not mainly be done to "take stock" of available knowledge or to estimate the studies contribution to advancing existing scientific knowledge though. The debates would focus on the value of the perspective, the specific angel taken by the researchers.

Applying an external project logic to social science research has serious implications for both dimensions. When external demand and expectations are driving social science research, it should surprise no one when these expectations are reflected in the normative approach and the design of the research project. Moreover, since in particular externally commissioned projects cannot be scrutinized in the same way that intrinsically motivated research can, social scientists run the risk in becoming complicit with and to reinforce specific normative assumptions by focusing on certain variables, using specific assumptions and "modeling" social context in a way that suits the needs and preferences of external clients.

Moreover, project-like social science research can contribute to reinforcing distinct social and political norms by lending legitimacy to specific normative positions. This latter problem stems from the unique relation of the social sciences to its objects of study. Unlike in the natural sciences, social sciences face the problem that their objects of study, people, can understand and *intentionally react* to the findings of social scientists. They are not only objects of research but subjects of debates about the knowledge claims made by researchers and as such can be talked to [Moon, 1977, p. 183] reflect upon and react to what is said about them [Ruser, 2015, p. 173–174] and thus *use the findings of research to alter the object of research*.

In the case of the social sciences, debates about the rising importance of externally commissioned, project-like research goes well beyond the changing contexts in which scientific research takes place [Jessop, 2018]. In the social sciences it is impossible to uphold a clear distinction and thus the separation of the study of the inner nature of science (philosophy of science) and its social functions (sociology of science) [Kasavin, 2019, p. 458]. Changing the social function of the social sciences, for instance, by tying its research focus to external needs thus directly affects its nature.

In the following final section of the paper, we will take a closer look at these potential changes by focusing on the epistemological consequences of adopting project-like research in the social sciences.

Epistemological Consequences of Project-like Research

Project thinking and more general the idea that the social sciences should, analogue to the natural science and technical disciplines, serve concrete social, political or economic interests have been criticized for their long term impact on how social science research is conducted and organized. Bob Jessop for instance warns of the "trend toward academic capitalism and profit-oriented entrepreneurial practices in the fields of education and research" [2018, 104] and attributes these developments to the increased financial, administrative and ideological pressure (Ibid.) David Lea goes even further and describes the "managerial university " as the new, dominant model for organizing research and education [Lea, 2011, p. 816–817]. He argues that the adoption of managerialism as guiding principle and normative vision for higher education had serious implications for research itself. Since management requires to surveillance and measurement of (research) activities, managerial universities emphasize quantifiable research "outputs" [Ibid., p. 830] and promote cost-benefit thinking that compares the resources "used" for acquiring knowledge with the actual knowledge output of research activities. In other word, the managerial university treats research – including social science research – as if these scholarly activities were "projects" analogous to managed tasks in corporations because this is the only way intellectual inquiries could be possibly managed. However, for Lea these developments do not only indicate a shift in *how* (social) science research is conducted, but for the epistemological basis of social science research.

Since managerial principles encourage and reward project like research, debate within the disciplines shifts towards, what Lea calls "materialistic" understandings of the subject matter [Ibid.]. In other words, since project managers and "eternal customers and sponsors" expect concrete, measure – and manageable "outputs" social scientist themselves are increasingly more likely to frame social problems, questions and phenomena in terms that allow to produce outputs and to derive quantifiable "deliverables" from managed and monitored research. The narrowing to "materialistic understanding" of the subject matter favors specific theoretical and methodological angles and thus leads to a shrinking of its epistemological foundation. The increased dependence of researchers on very specific social settings that expect meaningful research to take the form of manageable projects thus imposes a specific social epistemology

[Kasavin, 2015, p. 435] on the social sciences, one that has the potential to fundamentally re-shape its purpose and understanding of what should count as justifiable or justified knowledge.

Conclusion

Project based research in the social sciences is becoming a normal and accepted practice. However, serving "primary customers or sponsors" [Schwalbe, 2015] is much more than a symptom of a new "academic capitalism" [Jessop, 2018] and bears the risk of fundamentally changing the character of the social sciences. The adoption of managerial practices and conceiving of social science research as a series of manageable *projects* alters the every-day practices of doing research and threaten intellectual traditions require the social sciences to keep its distance from the normative structures it seeks to understand.

Conceiving of social science research as a sequence of projects, with manageable schedules, clear outcomes and oriented towards expectations and needs formulated outside the scientific community is more than a reaction to and reflection of developments towards academic capitalism. Likewise, project-like research shouldn't be mistaken for engaged or socially oriented scholarship. It is even less likely that such outside orientation lead to the more objective and useful social science that August Comte once envisioned.

Ilya Kasavin has shown how the contribution to "megaprojects" has elevated the status of the natural sciences and turned it into a "political agent" [Kasavin, 2020]. The same could be said about the countless contribution by natural science research to commercial and public project that led to important discoveries. This symbiotic relationship between natural science and societies has been mutual beneficial and surely contributed to the authority of natural sciences. It is therefore not surprising that project-like research and an orientation towards external needs (and appreciation) are appealing in the social sciences, especially given the tensions and disputes that the social science disciplines had been entangled in ever since birth of the modern social sciences in the 19th century.

However, as we have seen, these tensions and disputes are vital to the social sciences as they try to balance scientific rigor with emancipatory and empowering ambitions.

This raises important questions for future research on the social epistemology and social philosophy of the social sciences. Moreover, since the adoption of managerial project-like research designs can elevate their social impact., it is important to be aware of changes and challenges to their scientific ethos. An indispensable prerequisite for the protection of the scientific ethos is the relative autonomy of the scientific community

to set the rules, agree on practices and evaluate the quality of research. This is even more important in the social than in the natural sciences.

Finally, and most importantly, as David Lea warns us, accepting external expectations and adjusting research practices to managerial demands is not simply shifting responsibility to new communities that could be tasked with overseeing intellectual and ethical standards of research.

"[B]y reducing and attenuating the authority of faculty in the transfer of power to a managerial administration we are rendering management virtually unaccountable", writes Lea [2011, p. 835], thus reminding us that, instead of an uncritical adoption of project management principles scholarly debate needs to consider practical, ethical and, most importantly, epistemological consequences. Ilya Kasavin for long has defended and promoted the idea that we need a social philosophy of science [Kasavin, 2017; Kasavin, 2023] and emphasized that all science should be considered a "public good" [Kasavin, 2023] and express an "aristocratic ethos" [Kasavin, 2019, p. 17] rather than managerial professionalism. The current pressures to conceive of research as a series of clearly defined, outcome and output oriented, manageable projects highlight the urgency of a social philosophy of the social sciences.

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