Serious Social Science

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I once attended a psychology lecture in which the speaker argued that Freud was really a brilliant psychologist, but the field had passed him by because of its "physics envy". His specific example is perhaps easy to mock, but it has resonance because the problem is a real one. As Paul Graham shows, in general physicists are smarter than social scientists. But (to use a Grahamism), like kids trying to act adult, the social scientists end up emulating the form of these fields but not the content. In other words, instead of getting smarter, they play make-believe.

The first thing that comes is the numbers. Real science papers are filled with tables and graphs and regressions on piles of data, so the social scientists decide to do all that. In economics, they even go so far as to start coming up with equations and proving theorems. Then comes the technical language. Physics papers discuss the "gravitational wave perturbations about a brane cosmology embedded in a five-dimensional anti-de Sitter bulk" so the cult studs decide they should be just as incomprehensible.

And then, in the headiness of this newfound power of *science*, grand claims are made. As J. K. Galbraith writes (_Annals of an Abiding Liberal, p. 4): "It is the great desire of nearly all economists to see their subject as a science too. Accordingly, and without much thought, they hold that its matter is also fixed. The business firm, the market, the behavior of the consumer, like the oxygen molecule or the geologist's granite, are given."

This is not to say that there is anything intrinsically wrong with using math or jargon or making grand claims. But to adopt these habits reflexively is to put the means before the ends. Scientists do not use math because it is complicated but because, for what they are doing, it is effective. Their grand pronouncements become accepted because (sometimes, at least) they are true.

Such complaints, among a certain sector, are truisms. But the conclusion typically drawn with them is pure pessimism. Social behavior, they argue, is simply too complex for us to ever make real progress in the field. The topic is studied by idiots and charlatans because the intelligent and honest can immediately see its impossibility. I do not agree with such a view. In fact, I think it is only possible to maintain it thru abject ignorance of what science really knows.

The vulgar postmodern critique of science argued that scientists had become our modern priesthood: deified as "experts" they would make claims about how the world worked, claims with just as much authority as those made by religion in earlier times. And while such comparisons were wrong, they did betray a

truth: society has, for largely selfish reasons, inflated the accomplishments of science beyond their actual existence. (See R. C. Lewontin's fabulous *Biology as Ideology* for evidence of this theme, from a respected scientist.)

Scientists — even the hardest of scientists — fabricate data, fabricate studies, fall prey to fads, and otherwise get things wrong. But more relevantly, they just don't know that much. We have very little idea of how the body works; the pills we take are made through the bluntest of means. We don't know how to calculate very simple things, like the dispersion of milk in a cup of coffee. The illusion that social science is ineffective can only be sustained by ignorance of such ineffectiveness of hard science. The upside of all this is that there is hope for social science.

So what is to be done? For reasons beyond the scope of this article, its unlikely that the existing disciplines can be reformed. Instead what is needed is a culture of serious social science built outside the existing systems of academia. Its work should be primarily outwardly-facing, because that's the important audience. This means clear writing (unlike this article, perhaps) for public consumption. And it means compilations of broad scope, instead of obscure monographs.

We can already see the beginnings of such a thing in the work by people like Doug Henwood and Christian Parenti. But there is certainly much more to do, including building structures to do the work in.

So that's the other thing I'm thinking about.