

This intellectual space was also hierarchical. During the course of the twentieth century, economics became increasingly dominant (in Paul Samuelson's words, as the "queen of the social sciences"), becoming hugely influential in governing nations, businesses, and organizations of all kinds. Pitching against this hegemonic position, other social science disciplines sniped at the limited vision of instrumental "homo economicus" that this discipline seemed to champion. They had much less success, however, in dislodging economics from its primacy.

From the latter half of the twentieth century, this tension was overlain by a further differentiation between "pure" and "applied" social sciences. As states, businesses, and organizations of all forms became increasingly complex, their demands for expertise led to the expansion of the fields of social policy, management, health, education, and development. By the later twentieth century, these fields had often dwarfed in personnel and resources the pure social sciences, testifying to their powerful role in the rise of knowledge economies—what Nigel Thrift (2003) called "knowing capitalism."¹⁰ This put in place an intellectual pipeline in which the applied social sciences enacted the expertise, concepts, and methods that had been forged in the crucible of the pure social sciences.

This social science assemblage was remarkably successful during the twentieth century, especially its second half, but was suddenly to come under huge pressure during the early twenty-first century. In the wake of the dramatic digital advances, the beloved methodological tools that the social sciences had championed—the sample survey, ethnography, and the qualitative interview—rapidly came to look dated and arcane (see Savage and Burrows 2007; Halford and Savage 2017). Vociiferous and well-funded proponents of big data claimed that social research could be done much more quickly and effectively using the digital data sources left behind by administrative and commercial records. Why bother commissioning a sample survey when you could look at your own transaction data and very quickly work out in detail what was happening? The rise of big data caused growing anxiety about the status of social scientific knowledge, compounded by well-publicized examples of natural and information sciences deciding that they could now do social science using their computational skills without the need for much social scientific intervention.

It is in the context of this challenge to their intellectual authority that the theme of inequality allowed social scientists to stage a brilliant riposte. By