

How social sciences can contribute to changing a society

ASCN PROGRAMME ACADEMIC SWISS CAUCASUS NET

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Why social sciences?

In terms of benefit to society, the social sciences have traditionally been held to lag behind in comparison to the natural sciences, engineering and medicine. The findings and impact of social science projects cannot be so readily gauged by the basis of number of published works and papers, patents or spin-offs. For the most part, therefore, a 'direct benefit' for society cannot be demonstrated.

The difficulty inherent in assessing the impact of social science research immediately raises the question as to what benefit – or better still, what social relevance – the social sciences have and how can it be evaluated. Or to put it more provocatively: why should a society fund social science research projects if no direct, immediate benefit can be demonstrated?

The answer is complex and multifaceted: research in the social sciences and humanities is of particular relevance to the transition process. It can help identify the need for reform in sectors critical to a country's development. It can also help address challenges and identify possible solutions in areas essential to a country's political stability and socio-economic development, such as inter-ethnic relations, protection of minorities, nation-building, good governance and state-building. More on this in the brochure.

Philipp Egger

Director/CEO of Gebert RUF Stiftung
Zurich/Basel, Switzerland

On the role of the social sciences in 'difficult times'

«When reality is unpleasant, illusions offer an attractive escape route. In difficult times unscrupulous manipulators enjoy a competitive advantage over those who seek to confront reality.»

George Soros

There is no doubt that within and beyond countries in transition, knowledge needs to be gathered to enable us to better understand the problems and the direction of the change these countries are facing. In quasi-authoritarian countries, such as Russia or Belarus, the political regime seeks to control the production of socially relevant knowledge, for example through politicising research and using it as an instrument to achieve social goals. The social sciences could thus consider it part of their function to reflect on the conditions of a free and democratic society, because this is in itself a precondition for the very survival of freedom of research, the existence of autonomous scholarship. This tends to be part of the background knowledge of the researcher in precarious transitional societies, much more so than is the case in stable, democratised countries.

It is precisely in transition countries that social scientists must, for a whole variety of reasons, maintain a certain distance from their environment and take care to protect their autonomy. They must point out that the 'value' or 'benefit' of political science or sociology, for instance, lies in the fact that these disciplines do not serve the interests of politics or the economic system, but instead analyse societal problems and the issues of the day from their own perspective, supported by their own methods.

For the social sciences, engaging with socially relevant topics means that they must first of all engage with themselves. The analytical function that they perform in society with regard to social stakeholders, power structures, inequalities etc. also encompasses the critical exploration of the differentiation and problem formulations within the research disciplines. 'Confrontation with reality' then refers not only to the official myths and discourses, but also to the fact that the constructs of the social sciences can likewise be challenged.

On the other hand, the aim of the social sciences is not introspective self-observation, nor is it limited to the critical analysis of society. They also seek to draw attention to problem areas and alternative

courses of action within society itself, which in the case of politics, for instance, reinforces recognition of the necessity of certain political reforms. Precisely through this function, the social sciences are also able to nurture the hope, or the illusion, that their discourses and findings have an impact on society, on public opinion, and on policy-making. Research findings can contribute to the identification of new forms of discrimination and exclusion, and to alerting policy-makers to the need to address these issues.

In transitional countries, research projects examining the dynamics and direction of political, economic and social change contribute to an understanding of such processes. And precisely because, in the best case scenario, they impact on public communication, on the perception, identification and resolution of current problems, these projects have the power to change society. Any entity that does not seek greater clarity regarding how its society works, as is generally the case in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, also has little interest in the presence of a robust, critical system of social sciences. In contrast, those who share the ASCN programme's objective of encouraging and fostering the development of the social sciences also indirectly foster their relevance and their resonance in society.

Nicolas Hayoz

Professor of Political Science at the University of Fribourg, Director, ASCN Programme

Denis Dafflon

ASCN Programme Coordinator



We simply do not know: on the benefit of the social sciences for policy-making

What do political leaders need to know about the world in order to be able to govern it properly? Who can, and who should, tell them? This is where the social sciences come into play. But while policy-makers show little interest in explanations of past events, predictions are difficult to make.

WOLFGANG STREECK

The most ambitious goal of modern-day social sciences is to develop theories that explain observed facts as the effects of their causes. Why is it that birth rates have been falling for decades, voter turnout is declining throughout Europe, and large parts of Africa are failing to develop? Politicians, however, as people of action, are interested in explanations only when what is being explained has practical significance for them, allowing the causes claimed by the theory to be influenced by political means in such a way that their effects bring about change in a desired direction.

A theory that traces declining performance in school to accelerated biological development in adolescence may be correct or it may be wrong, but it holds no interest for political leaders (unless it can be used to absolve the government from responsibility). It would be a different story if the explanation were increased class sizes; in this case, the determined cause could be used as leverage – by the government, to improve learner performance, or by the opposition, to hold those in charge accountable.

ABILITY TO MAKE PREDICTIONS

Politicians, while not very interested in explanations, are almost always interested in predictions. Predictions are also based on theories and are, essentially, also explanations, but of future states rather than present or past ones. Many researchers, including some social scientists, consider the ability to make predictions to be the real mark of a good theory. Since politicians must continually take a gamble on the future, they hold a similar view.

Thus, those scientists who promise information about how much the economy will grow or shrink in the coming year or which occupations will see the highest growth rates in the next 10 years can expect not only an attentive ear, but also generous financial contributions from governments and political parties.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to suspect that the ability of the social sciences to predict the future not only leaves much to be desired, but is also fundamentally limited. “Why did no one see this coming?” asked the British Queen during a visit to the London School of Economics in November 2008, referring to the global financial crisis. The researchers, as the representatives of their own interests, could have responded: because there was too little investment in research. But not even economists were that hard-nosed back then; the shock was probably too great.

A better answer to the Queen’s question would have been: some people *did* see it coming, because every event is always predicted by a few people if there are enough people making predictions about it.

MORE THAN ONE VALID EXPLANATION

That they could not have known the answer, however, is not due to a lack of research, but rather lies in the essence of the matter: in the nature of the social world and the kind of knowledge we are able, in the best case, to obtain about it. Meanwhile, word is now spreading that the social sciences are incapable of making ‘point predictions’ – predictions about individual cases. However, point predictions are likely to be the only ones in which political leaders would be interested.

There are solid, logical reasons why the social sciences cannot say much about individual cases. Nor can this be changed, even with the most ingenious refinements to their scientific toolbox. Research on social processes will always involve fewer cases than the number of factors that could explain these cases, thus inevitably leading to more than one valid explanation for any given state of affairs. And every future state comes about as a unique result of a unique interplay of many factors – a one-of-a-kind situation for which there is no normal distribution, and whose distinctive features thus cannot be derived from general laws.

This can also be expressed in more pointed fashion: the essential historical authenticity of the social world is proven in the impossibility of imagining a future adjusted for coincidences. History becomes what it is through events that could also have failed to occur, and thus would have permitted a different history to be written. Without World War I and the Russian Revolution, which did not have to occur, the twentieth century would have taken a different course and modern



capitalism would have developed differently; but in what way it would have been different nobody can know.

Historical events such as the collapse of Communism in 1989, the reunification of Germany or the current financial crisis can subsequently be reconstructed as probable, or even declared to be inevitable; but until they have occurred, other events can prevent, delay or modify them, without anyone ever being able to know that they were just about to occur.

SOCIETY AS A MACHINE

What politicians would like even better than predictions are technical instructions for controlling social developments. Politicians like to see society as a machine with set screws: turn the right screw and the world works just the way you want it to. The task of science is to label the screws legibly. Where do this mechanistic world view and the social utopias that feed on it come from? The dream of scientific methods for controlling behaviour – methods that trigger no resistance because those affected by them simply do not notice them being applied – clearly persists. Many people believe that the development of these methods is the real task of a truly scientific social science. For example, colleagues from the natural sciences often ask social scientists for measures they can use to turn off the public's 'hostility to technology'; after all, that's the subject area in which the social scientists are supposed to really know their stuff.

But unlike in the natural or engineering sciences, the field of social sciences is made up of subjects who are capable of making their own

observations and taking action, and who are not by any means indifferent to what science claims about them and the purposes for which governments use such findings. People recognise attempts to control their actions, and attribute intentions to such attempts. In turn, they respond with their own intentions.

Just as the social sciences are incapable of predicting the future, the reactions of self-determining subjects to scientific attempts at control are unpredictable. Social science theories cannot be kept secret. Their use for behaviour control will be noticed sooner or later. When that happens, the reasons behind the application of the theory will be examined and responded to with deliberate purpose. For example, the researchers in the famous Hawthorne experiments (1924 to 1932) claimed to have found that female workers worked faster and better even without a pay increase if they were treated in a friendly manner and if the walls of their workshop were painted yellow. But after word got around among the staff that the management simply wanted to save money through kind words and yellow paint, they demanded a pay increase and went on strike. The fact that social science theories can be recognised in the world they analyse influences their validity in one way or another.

But that does not mean that the social sciences have to be politically useless – only that it is not the theory-building research so highly prized by the scientists themselves that can contribute to improving policy-making. Although counting, measuring and observing social issues may seem trivial to some, it is anything but.

THE STATE DOES NOT HAVE A MONOPOLY ON DATA COLLECTION

The modern state and the democratic discourse are in many ways dependent on information about the state of society that is not readily available, the collection of which is often extremely complicated and requires extensive expert knowledge. Only a small portion of the data needed by political leaders is immediately evident from the state's own administrative records: for example, the number of births and divorces, or number of recipients of social benefits of any kind, the average grades of high school graduates or the age structure of retirees. More often, however, the state is not allowed or is not able to collect key information itself – such as the number of newborns with a migration background, or the true extent of drug addiction.

Other factors that may seem to the layperson to be entirely unproblematic must be determined through complex estimation operations that require constant refinement. These include not only the GNP, but also the population, which has not been counted directly since the last censuses in 1981 (German Democratic Republic) and 1987 (Federal Republic of Germany), but is now simply extrapolated using complicated, more or less satisfactory methods. The reason is that society resists being counted – a further example of the active role that the subject of social science plays for the discipline by responding to it.

Politically important issues such as per capita economic growth, birth and immigration rates or the unemployment rate are thus known with far less certainty than is normally assumed. In fact, there are instances where governments have tried for years to resolve problems, or have been held to account by voters for problems that, when the statistical data were later revised, turned out not really to have been problems after all.

The only way to make visible the decisions and interests that contribute to the official descriptions of social reality is an independent social science system. Only such a system is able to ensure the necessary pluralism through which solely politically problematic issues can be brought to light, or through which it can be shown how infinitesimal changes – for example, in the definition of joblessness, or in the classification of job applicants by employment offices – can raise or lower the unemployment rate.

The same holds true for the measurement of poverty and inequality, or in determining the performance level of students and schools or workers' satisfaction with their working conditions. In short, without access to continuous, methodologically legitimate, critical information from society about society itself, the political discourse would be even more devoid of content than it often already is.

WOLFGANG STREECK, born in 1946, undertakes research in political economy and economic sociology, among other subject areas. From 1988, he taught at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and became a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin in 1993. Streeck has also held visiting professorships at various international universities, before being appointed Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in 1995.

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Strengthening the pillars of democracy

Nino Abzianidze is a doctoral student at the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) Democracy at the University of Zurich. It is abundantly clear to her that there is still a long way to go before the key pillars of democracy are firmly in place in Georgia. Social sciences can make a contribution here.

Nino Abzianidze will never forget that Saturday evening. It was 13 March 2010, and the Georgian was spending the evening with friends in the country's capital, Tbilisi. The phone rings – it's her mother. "The Russians are attacking. The President is dead." Two years after the war between Georgia and Russia, things are threatening to escalate again. Nino Abzianidze and her friends switch on the television, and the Imedi TV channel, a pro-government broadcaster, shows images of Russian troops marching into the city. Within a short time, Tbilisi's mobile phone network has virtually collapsed. Crowds of people run out onto the streets, confused and afraid.

Half an hour later, things become clear: the story was made up. Georgia's President, Mikheil Saakashvili, is alive and there has been no invasion. A short time later, Imedi TV announces that the broadcast had been intended only to show what could happen if the President were to be murdered. However, many Georgians believe the aim was to create panic and to show clearly who the enemy is, namely the Russians.

STILL A LONG WAY TO GO

For Nino Abzianidze, this example shows that Georgia still has a long way to go before the key pillars of democracy – such as media freedom – are firmly in place. "Some journalists in Georgia do not report on an independent basis. They do not fulfil their mission and they allow themselves to be used as tools." Sacrificing the truth in times of peace is the wrong approach.

Journalists need better training – the representatives of the media need to be better informed of their rights and obligations. "This too is a task for the social sciences – in this case, media sciences." Precisely in countries such as Georgia, which are undergoing a process of change, and which have no democratic

tradition to fall back on, the social sciences make an important contribution to ensuring that this process succeeds. Transition countries undergo a lot of complex changes, "and these changes should be based on facts".

Having started her doctoral studies at the University of Zurich in July 2011 under the auspices of the NCCR Democracy, over the next few years Nino Abzianidze will be taking an in-depth look at the role of the media in post-conflict situations. Her doctoral studies are being funded by the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN) and the NCCR Democracy. Her dissertation will deal with the role of the media in collective identity formation. What influence do the media have? How can they fuel or stem the conflict? To answer these questions, she will be taking a detailed look at the data from Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and analysing these data using the tools of social science.

A DIFFERENT CAREER WAS PLANNED

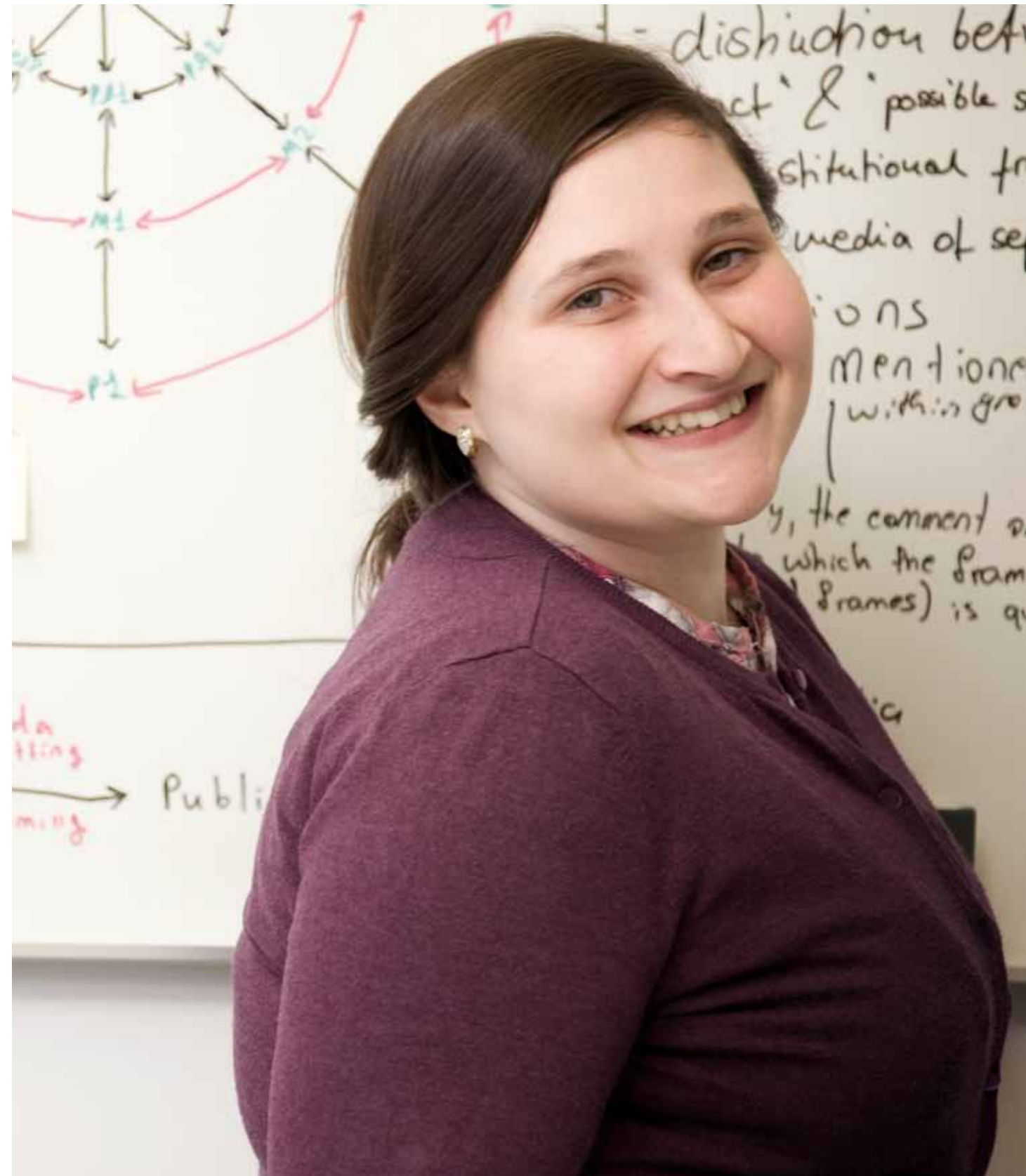
"It's actually quite remarkable that I've become a social scientist," says Nino Abzianidze, explaining that doctors predominate within her family, including her father. With a grin, she recounts that as a little girl, she liked to look through medical books and "marvel at the most awful pictures". But one day she realised she could no longer stand the sight of blood, and knew that she wanted to study something other than medicine. To begin with, she opted for history, but then switched to the social sciences at the Centre for Social Sciences, Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University. She has not regretted this decision – quite the contrary, in fact. "The further into the course I got, the more I realised that I had made the right choice."

RETURN TO GEORGIA

And what are her plans once she has got her doctorate? "After that, I want to go back to

Georgia. I would like to help the country make progress." In Georgia today, there is a tendency for researchers to concentrate on their own country when asking questions. However, this makes it difficult to gain international recognition. For this reason, it is important that Georgian scientists discuss matters with their colleagues abroad. Only in this way can they build up networks, which are vital for pursuing good research.

Building up these networks and establishing personal contacts takes a great deal of time and generates little success in the initial phase, since it is primarily a matter of finding out what topics others are conducting research on. Only in this way, however, can successful research cooperation be built up in a second step. "I hope that, through the contacts, knowledge and experience I gain during my doctoral studies, I will be able to contribute in some small way to the blossoming of the social sciences in Georgia."





Social sciences and the culture of common sense

What is it that Georgia as a country is lacking? Many deficits are frequently mentioned: there is an obvious shortfall in security, insufficient economic development, gaps in democracy. There is also a significant shortage of capacity in the social sciences: supply trails well behind demand.

GHIA NODIA

These problems are obviously of a different scale. But do they correspond? Does the development and promotion of the social sciences have any place in the list of national priorities? No, the social sciences cannot save Georgia. I am sceptical that academics will be able to draw up a comprehensive program of national development that will enable policy-makers to make Georgia free, affluent, and democratic.

In fact, the ability of social scientists to save the world, or even a single country, is a myth that is part of the problem. The Soviet Union, the country whose legacy Georgia is still struggling to overcome, was built on precisely that myth: a social science theory paving the road to salvation. This mythologising doctrine prevented the emergence of any tradition of genuine social scientific scholarship. And as a result, Georgia had to start from scratch 20 years ago.

In the Georgian case – that of a country preoccupied with conflicts and survival – the new social science emerged in the form of a very technical, empirical research agenda commissioned by businesses, international organisations and NGOs. While Georgian society went through a series of profound transformations that were extremely painful, but also intellectually challenging, there was almost nobody to study these transformations in a thorough and systematic way. The people who

usually make up the intellectual class either went abroad or fled to the world of the NGOs.

Where societal transformations were discussed, this was mainly done within the existing paradigm of intellectualism that is another legacy of the Soviet era. Its features include a weakness for myths and conspiracy theories, and a readiness to jump to far-reaching conclusions based on untested personal observations. This often took place within the framework of the new institutional paradigm that I would refer to as ‘NGO intellectualism’: assessments of social processes had to be inextricably linked with defending the right kind of political agenda.

Only in recent years, after large-scale reforms initiated in the university system, has social science started to develop as an academic discipline and build bridges to the international scholarly community. Lack of capacity is the main problem, but for the first time universities are actually doing something to counteract this. International programs linking Georgian universities to partners in global centres of excellence are indispensable for ensuring the success of this process.

CULTURE OF COMMON SENSE

How will the country benefit from the development and advancement of the social sciences? Certainly, this advancement may contribute to resolving specific problems in a number of different ways. But I would argue that the chief potential gain will be to do with a general change in mind-set. What Georgia as a country needs is a culture of common sense. Nothing would develop this culture better than fostering

a habit of basing judgments on facts, rather than on ‘values’ or political agendas.

It is a widely recognised problem that Georgian politics is divorced from policy issues. There is virtually no political debate on how to solve the country’s problems – only a debate on who is morally worse, the government or the opposition. Social sciences by themselves cannot resolve this predicament. But the lack of basic data on Georgian society, as well as the absence of professional research and debate on the causes of and linkages between different problems, makes issue-based discussions close to impossible.

To take one example, issues of democratisation in Georgia are the subject of heated political debates, and legitimately so. On the other hand, President Mikheil Saakashvili has recently identified ‘modernisation’ as the country’s main goal, thus creating speculation as to whether this might imply abandoning the agenda of democratic reforms. Both of these concepts – democratisation and modernisation – are social science concepts that have a strong tradition of theorising and comparative research. By placing Georgian developments into comparative perspective, social scientists can make debates on these issues much more concrete and productive.

Social science should produce a mirror in which a country can look before working to improve itself. It should generate a critical mass of information and debate based on facts rather than vague observations and group agendas. In Georgia, we have not yet reached that point.

GHIA NODIA is a Professor of Politics, and Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at Ilija Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He is also a founder of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD). He has published works on regional security, state-building and democratisation in the Caucasus. From February to December 2008, Ghia Nodia served as Georgia’s Minister of Education and Science.



Social sciences hold up a mirror to society

Social sciences enable us to throw a spotlight on our own society and they question and deconstruct the mythologies that circulate and proliferate in any society.

Mr Zedania, how long have the 'free' social sciences existed in Georgia?

Since the early 1990s. In the Soviet Union, the social sciences were virtually non-existent; they were supplanted by the Marxist ideology. The situation in other areas of the sciences was quite different – a good physicist or chemist was well respected. But a researcher who wanted to work in line with academic standards in sociology, for instance, had little chance of remaining in academia. There were times when researchers paid for their academic activities with their lives. All of this, of course, severely stunted the development of the social sciences in Georgia, and throughout the entire Soviet Union.

What is the situation like for the social sciences today?

Still not satisfactory. Developing and promoting young researchers in the long term is difficult, because we are not really able to offer interesting prospects, not even to promising young scholars. 'Brain drain' is a new problem that has sprung up since the 'Wende', the fall of the Iron Curtain. Not just in the sense that some researchers

emigrate overseas; they are also leaving research and going into other institutions, for instance into international organisations that are active in Georgia. The old legacy is making itself felt too: there is still a lag behind natural sciences. This is clear, for example, from the number of works published internationally, which is significantly less for the social sciences. Only a handful of publications by Georgian social scientists have attracted international interest.

What are the effects of this?

As a result, not only is it difficult for Georgian social scientists to become part of the international scientific community, but as a further consequence they are not able to fulfil their societal function at all.

And what is this function, in your opinion?

A number of points can be mentioned. Firstly, the social sciences enable us to throw a spotlight on our own society. They hold up a mirror to society, and attempt to provide answers to key questions: Who are we? What historical processes have led our society to the set of values

and cultural constructs it currently embraces? Particularly in a country like Georgia, where the notion of democracy has not had centuries over which to develop, the social sciences are there in order to cast a critical eye over various state and social institutions, over the administration, the government, the justice system, the police, the political parties, the media. All these institutions already existed before the collapse of the Communist system, but afterwards they had to take on new duties and responsibilities within the democratic process. But what duties and responsibilities exactly? And how does the interplay among the various entities of government function? This is where the social sciences can provide some clarification; based on scientific facts, they are able to put forward proposals, and fine-tune them to apply to the particular country in question. Indeed, the specificity of Georgia needs to be considered.

What is the second important point?

The second point is closely connected to the first. An important function of the social sciences is to question and deconstruct social and cultural mythologies that quickly circulate and proliferate in any society if they are not actively combated. The period of great upheavals and the uncertainty that has prevailed in Georgia over the past 20 years offer a particularly fertile climate for such mythologies, which are often harmful for liberal values and the exercise of democracy. Here, the social sciences, with their robust basis in rational criteria, their critical view of societal phenomena, and the sophisticated analytical methods they employ, are a particularly apt antidote.

What effect can social sciences bring about in this respect?

It's vital that every single citizen has at least a rudimentary understanding of the interplay of relationships within society. Everyone should have the ability to classify and evaluate information, for example, when thinking about ethnic nationalism, political conspiracy theories, or religious fundamentalism. In a society that possesses a certain degree of critical ability, attitudes like these have little chance of taking hold, and the individuals who put about this information have no possibility of attaining genuinely important positions within a democracy. Of course, these people cannot be prevented from continuing to disseminate their biased information, but the information will fall on barren ground – that is the bottom line. In transition countries such as Georgia, where structures and values have changed radically and rapidly, the situation leaves much to be desired in this respect. The lack of a strong social science tradition is a factor – it must be possible for citizens to access existing research and data if this is needed for their political decision-making or civic duties.

Kant defined enlightenment as having the courage to use one's own reason. An excellent definition, but in our over-complex society one needs a specific institutional structure within which one is able to train one's intellect, and from which one can borrow the existing forms of reflection. Universities, academic institutes, represent an institutional structure of this type, and social sciences should play a key role in these structures.

To be able to accomplish this, greater numbers of capable, qualified social scientists would be required. What could be done to improve the position of the social sciences in Georgia?

What is needed is a continuous exchange with international colleagues, for example within the framework of joint research projects, but also



through European academics spending time in Georgia and Georgian academics spending time in Europe. For instance, there is a need to develop special university programmes.

Social research in Georgia continues to be hampered by the fact that a great deal of data is simply not accessible because it has never been collected. For instance, a couple of years ago we tried to conduct studies on the shift in values in Georgia. However, a retrospective examination enabling us to establish a baseline and place the present-day situation in its historical context is difficult to conduct because that data just doesn't exist. We must do everything we can to ensure that the coming generation of social scientists in Georgia is better served in this respect.

GIGA ZEDANIA has studied philosophy, sociology and cultural studies in Georgia, the USA, Hungary and Germany, and is Professor and Director of the Institute for Modernity Studies at Ilia State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He has published a number of volumes on the transformation of Georgian society, including works on the shift in values, political elite, nationalism and secularisation. As part of the ASCN, he is responsible for coordinating Swiss-Georgian cooperation.



ASCN Project: the Role of Social Capital in Rural Community Development in Georgia

«... in accordance with the local situation and the temper of the inhabitants ... should determine, in each case, the particular system of institutions which is best, not perhaps in itself, but for the State for which it is destined.»

Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

But how can one know which system of institutions is the best for a given society, if “the local situation and the temper of the inhabitants” are not studied? Knowing about society is particularly important in transitional countries, where new institutions are crafted top-down, almost from scratch.

In Soviet times, Georgian agricultural production was organised into large enterprises – collectively owned kolkhozes and state-owned sovkhozes. Georgia, a mountain republic in the south of the USSR, had a widespread informal economy. Rural households used to cultivate small plots of land and had cows, selling some of what they produced at the market. This tradition of individualistic production appeared to be a good starting point for the market-oriented transformation. At the beginning of the 1990s, kolkhozes and sovkhozes disappeared, while most of the arable land was divided into small plots and distributed among the rural population.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION PLUMMETED

However, the reform did not succeed. Tiny households generally became subsistence producers, rather than participants in the market economy. Agricultural production plummeted, and has continued to decline in recent years. New ideas are needed in order to increase productivity and to help rural villages survive.

The future depends on policies that are capable of pushing the situation in one of two possible directions. Turning subsistence-level farms into effective units of a rural economy requires the provision of public goods, services, subsidies and agricultural cooperation. If these policies are applied, the economic value attributed to small and medium plots of land may increase, while the owners of this land may gradually evolve into a middle class of an economically significant rural population. Alternatively, the government may support redistribution of land from the rural population to the major producers. In this case, major enterprises may take the lead in the agricultural economy.

Which of these policies would work better depends on many factors, including social capital, understood as the internal capacity of a community to sustain the cooperative activities of its members.

COLLECTIVE ACTION IS RARE

It may come as a surprise to many who have tended to think of a Soviet society as collectivist to know that cooperation, especially collective action, is a relatively rare phenomenon in Georgian villages. Rationally, it might be expected that households would benefit from cooperation by pooling their limited resources, but villagers exhibit considerable distrust towards any form of collective action requiring some form of resource aggregation. The reasons for this distrust are not yet fully understood.

The ASCN project ‘The Role of Social Capital in Rural Community Development in Georgia’ aims to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. As part of this project, we travelled to rural areas, talking to people, conducting interviews and running focus groups. We were looking for answers to the following questions: What kinds of cooperative activities can be observed? What are the patterns of such cooperative actions? How intensive, rigorous and persistent are these patterns?

We came to the conclusion that intensive social cooperation is not always equivalent to achieving social capital. ‘Horizontal’ cooperation between equals may exist without becoming ‘capital’ – that is, without social strength being converted into market success or political influence. The situation may be compared to an hourglass in which village inhabitants are at the bottom while the economic and political resources are in the upper part. Although they cooperate informally on the lower level, the village inhabitants are not able to convert this cooperation into capital which would bring them resources. The existence of the narrow bottleneck between the community and the system prevents the rural areas from developing further.

The next step is to conduct a survey amongst the inhabitants of 20 selected villages. This survey will enable project members to better understand the nature of the factors that may help to broaden the bottleneck, and to transform cooperation into capital.



MARINA MUSKHELISHVILI is Head of the Centre for Social Studies in Tbilisi, Georgia. She has published extensively on democratisation and democratic theory. She is Project Leader of the ASCN project ‘The Role of Social Capital in Rural Community Development in Georgia’. The project was launched in September 2010 and will run until August 2012.



Including Armenia in the international scientific community

Armenian scholars know little about the transition models already described by scientists in other countries. For them to understand Armenian society, there is a need to translate textbooks and modern studies and to include Armenia in the international scientific community.

ALEXANDER ISKANDARYAN

As in most post-Soviet countries, developing the social sciences in Armenia is a major challenge. Owing to the strong ideological bias of Soviet social science, a whole raft of scholarly disciplines, theories and narratives was banned during the Soviet era, holding back the development of the entire field (as compared, for example, to the natural sciences and mathematics). The mandatory, unquestioned domination of a simplistic form of Marxism led to a situation where university textbooks relied on out-of-date theories, cutting-edge publications were out of bounds, and even the classic texts in some fields were never translated.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, the sciences and technologies that had not been subject to ideological pressures, and were therefore better integrated into the international academic framework, were faced first and foremost with financial challenges. The small, impoverished post-Soviet countries, such as Armenia, could no longer afford the infrastructure or the equipment. As a result, scientists began to

emigrate; brain drain is the main issue affecting mathematics and natural sciences in the former USSR, as these scholars are competitive by Western standards.

In the social sciences, brain drain from Armenia is negligible; on the whole, Western universities are not brimming with post-Soviet historians or political scientists, for the simple reason that the USSR did not produce any competitive scholars in these fields. In Armenia, professors of Marxism often now teach political science and other social sciences; in most cases, they have not even had relevant vocational training, but have simply renamed their courses. As for research, the quantity has dropped sharply, and the quality is not only yet to improve but in some cases is in decline, even by Soviet standards, due to meagre financing and a lack of skilled teachers.

Of course, in the past 20 years, some students have received an education in the West, and some scholars have managed to learn modern methodologies and have got their hands on good quality publications, but this is still not enough to change the entire field. The points of growth are not numerous or powerful enough to create a new generation.

The special challenge of social sciences is that, whereas natural sciences or technology can be developed in the West, where the funds and the infrastructures are in place, and the rest of the world can still benefit, the social sciences do not work like that. The social scientist needs to be in Armenia to study Armenian society, its development and its potential, and to propose solutions for the ongoing societal

transition. Sociology, political science and anthropology are essential disciplines to enable a society to reflect on its priorities and identities; a perspective on history is also vital. For a country to enter the international arena, it needs first to understand what it is, and what it wants to be.

Instead, due to the current plight of the social sciences, the quality of public discourses has sunk to a preposterous low. On television or in any other mass medium in Armenia, it is virtually impossible to find a rational analytical debate on politics, history, migration or inter-ethnic relations. There is almost nobody whom journalists can approach for meaningful and informed comments. Most talking heads in these fields are either politicised actors, whose motives are political rather than scientific, or semi-educated 'experts' whose comments can at times sound quite surrealistic. It is too bad that the topics on which they pontificate are crucial for the country's, and society's, wellbeing: relations with neighbours, developing (or not developing) a European identity, defining the direction of reforms and introducing new practices in a wide variety of areas, from education to the media.

A good illustration is offered by the discourse surrounding Armenian-Turkish relations, which embraces a whole raft of concerns, all of them of primary importance to Armenian society. Yet the debates have become focused almost exclusively on centuries-old historical memories that are not necessarily even relevant to the specific issue being debated. Similarly, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which is important to the entire region, is still understood and discussed within a 'desert island' paradigm, as if it were a unique and completely isolated phenomenon. Clearly, knowledge of similar phenomena worldwide is lacking, as is the ability to apply this knowledge to one's own society.

That said, some useful and professional studies are being conducted in Armenia. For instance, in the field of political science there is some research on ideological trends and local governance. Sociologists have studied a range of issues, from migration trends to social trust. This is not enough for a breakthrough, but it is something.

At this stage, the key problem in, for example, political science is that Armenian scholars know little, or have insufficient depth of knowledge, about transition and development models and paradigms already studied and described by scholars in various other countries. To enable these Armenian scholars to understand their own society, there is a need to translate textbooks and up-to-date studies, to include Armenia in the international scholarly community, to engage in joint projects with partners abroad, to ensure the mobility of students and faculty, and much more. Poor progress in advancing the social sciences in Armenia will hinder the country's political, economic and cultural development, reducing the efficiency of investments, including investments in science and technology.

ALEXANDER ISKANDARYAN is one of the founders of the Caucasus Institute, and has been its Director since January 2005. The Caucasus Institute is a postgraduate academic institute and think tank. Iskandaryan's work focuses on ethno-political conflicts, post-Communist transformations and nation-building in the former USSR in general, and in the Caucasus in particular.



Social sciences are the lungs of society

Lea Sgier of the Central European University in Budapest on the role of the social sciences and why social scientists build too few bridges to people who could benefit from this knowledge.

Ms Sgier, what role do the social sciences play in our society?

They play a number of roles. First of all, they are there to identify problems that need to be addressed, including problems that have not yet necessarily been recognised as such by policy-makers. Secondly, their role is to analyse mechanisms, processes and structures and thus to understand how society functions. Incidentally, this can also open spaces for public debate and highlight possibilities for political governance. The third, and in my opinion most fundamental, role of the social sciences is that of critically scrutinising society and placing trends and developments in a critical perspective. Much like art and the media, the social sciences are, in a way, the ‘lungs’ of a society: in the best case, they contribute to a society’s self-reflection upon who they are, and where they can and want to go. For this reason, in totalitarian systems the social sciences are typically either suppressed or instrumentalised by those in power.

Social sciences and politics are therefore connected. But how do the two systems differ?

Overall, academic scholarship is longer-lived than day-to-day politics. It is not defined by the cut and thrust of politics, and the views that it represents are not dictated by political interest groups. It therefore has the freedom to critically engage with the society and the economic system it is studying, including in ways that may not lead to any directly applicable conclusions. Social science also has the time and space – and this is very important – to critically examine and further refine its own instruments, theories, concepts, methods etc.

Can you give specific examples of this?

The social sciences can contribute, for instance, to a better understanding of the processes of democratisation: What are the factors that contribute to some democratisation processes being successful while others simply grind to a halt? Why does the process work in some countries and not in others? Social sciences can

also help us understand the situation of specific population groups, e.g. the ‘working poor’. Who are they exactly? How did they end up in this position? What can be done about it?

The state also collects some data that can address such issues. Are the data from the social sciences more reliable than those collected by the state?

That really depends on the context. Western states also have institutions that collect high-quality data that comply with scientific criteria – in Switzerland, for instance, in the person of the Swiss Federal Statistics Office. But except for statistical offices, state institutions gather data (if they gather any at all) from a narrower, more pragmatic and more ‘interested’ perspective. On the whole, scientific data are subject to more rigorous quality criteria and control mechanisms, and are also much more thoroughly analysed.

One criticism sometimes levelled at the social sciences is that their results are not really surprising, and that the same conclusions could have been reached using just healthy common sense.

The benchmark for “good” social research is not how surprising, but how solid and relevant its results are. Findings based on data collected and analysed with scientific rigour are in many ways superior to common sense: more nuanced, precise and robust, and definitely harder to sweep under the carpet. Importantly, they are also more transparent and therefore open to criticism and rational debate; that’s very important, especially when it comes to topics where discussions are emotionalised or ideological.

Another point of criticism that is used against social scientists is that they build too few bridges to the people who could benefit from their knowledge – politicians, for example. Do you subscribe to this view?

I think so, yes. The knowledge we gain is too rarely passed on beyond disciplinary bounda-

ries, and also to the wider public. Although research in Europe is increasingly carried out in consortia and networks, and although knowledge transfer to the wider public and to policy-makers is more actively supported today than in the past, research probably remains too much of a purely academic and disciplinary affair.

Why are social scientists not more involved when it comes to making their work known to the wider public?

To some extent, it’s because maintaining a career in academia is not about transferring your knowledge or about being policy-relevant, but about publishing in highly specialised academic journals. Activities whose purpose is to make specialist knowledge accessible to a wider audience – such as teaching, involvement with associations, contact with the media – play a very subordinate role. In addition, for many academics the institutional workload has increased enormously in recent years, due to growing student numbers and an increasing bureaucratisation of universities. Researchers therefore often have neither the time nor the incentive to concern themselves with knowledge transfer.

Has the focus on numbers of papers published intensified?

In my area, yes. And the trend is increasing.

LEA SGIER is a political scientist and Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science of the Central European University in Budapest. She is active within the ASCN as an academic consultant and instructor of methodology workshops. She studied Political Science at the University of Geneva.



A new generation of talented scholars

The Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN) is a unique programme aimed at promoting the social sciences and humanities in the Southern Caucasus (primarily Georgia and Armenia). Its various activities foster the emergence of a new generation of talented scholars. "International programmes linking Georgian universities to partners in global centres of excellence are indispensable," says Ghia Nodia, Professor of Politics and Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. "What Georgia as a country needs is a culture of common sense. Nothing would breed this culture better than developing a habit of basing judgments on facts, rather than on 'values' or political agendas."

This is exactly what the ASCN sets out to achieve. The programme focuses on the advancement of individuals who, thanks to their ASCN experience, become better integrated into international academic networks.

So far, the programme has financed 21 projects. In 2011, approximately 200 scholars benefited from the programme. The ASCN supports research projects, training courses, workshops, scholarships and conferences in Georgia, Armenia and Switzerland, and in this way enables all scholars involved to expand their international networks.

Coordination

The programme, initiated and supported by the Gebert Rüt Stiftung, is coordinated and operated by the Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe (IICEE) at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

Contact

Denis Dafflon, Programme Coordinator, University of Fribourg, Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe, denis.dafflon@unifr.ch

ascn.ch

grstiftung.ch

Masthead

Gebert Rüt Stiftung, Bäumleingasse 22/4 – 4051 Basel, tel. +41 61 270 88 22, fax +41 61 270 88 23, info@grstiftung.ch, grstiftung.ch

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