

Color-Blind Disciplining of Race-Conscious Research: Critical Intervention Across the Academy, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, June 1-5, 2009

Notes and thoughts on

I. Wallerstein et al. Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences

by

George Lipsitz

In slightly more than one hundred pages, the authors of this report survey the historical construction of the social sciences from the eighteenth century to 1945, identify critical debates within the social sciences from 1945 to the present, and argue that new social relations, state structures, technologies, and economic patterns and processes require a restructuring of the social sciences.

Just as the nation state has been the key form through which populations enter modernity, the disciplines are the venues in which most scholarly arguments take place. Yet the nation state and the disciplines are historical creations, constructed at particular times and places to serve particular ends. They are artificial constructs that come to seem natural and inevitable over time. They cannot be ignored and while there are significant stakes in winning disciplinary arguments, they also inhibit alternative and oppositional imaginaries, epistemologies, and ontologies.

Open the Social Sciences identifies the origins of nearly all disciplines in Europe's encounters with its "others." Imperial projects gave rise to anthropology's interest "primitive" civilizations and geography's mission of mapping the globe. State building shaped history's chronicles of linear progress, literature and linguistics' emphasis on the common culture of the nation, and political science's analysis of orderly administration and government. The liberal legal subject and the capitalist market subject helped give

rise to ordered systems like tonal functional harmony in music, grammar in language, and typologies of species in biology. In the humanities, departments of classics, literature, language, and area studies still reflect the interests of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, while most of the original work advancing “universal” principles in the social sciences took place in one of five countries: England, France, Germany, Italy, and the U.S.

The authors contend that colonial encounters augmented knowledge about and recognition of multiple systems in the world, but European intellectual and social traditions insisted on seeing differences in terms of hierarchies, as “better than or worse than” rather than merely “different from” Europe. The disciplines emerged to explain and perpetuate European dominance. The social sciences made themselves useful to those in power by proclaiming that social unity, skilled administration, state power, and social order would be strengthened by sociology, national literatures, languages, and histories. Anthropology promised that close study of specific groups of putatively primitive “people without history” could illuminate the conditions of modernity. Classics and oriental studies emerged in an opposite mode, to “discipline” the ideological threat posed to the west by the existence of other advanced civilizations (past and present) by positioning civilizations in hierarchies and judging other societies as exotic while making the west the unmarked norm against which difference should be measured.

Through control of career training and professional reward, the disciplines have shaped an intellectual division of labor that assigns different practices and different kinds of evidence to discrete scholarly communities. Historians work in archives, anthropologists examine customs, classicists and orientalists look at texts, economists study markets, political scientists study government, and sociologists examine social

structures and social relations. Research and teaching by social scientists takes place on different floors and in different buildings at the university, their findings appear in books placed on different shelves in libraries and bookstores. Yet in social life, all of these areas of study interact and are mutually constitutive. The divisions that emerge from disciplinarity have profound ideological ramifications. Separating political economy from moral philosophy and then economics from political economy facilitated thinking about economic behavior as a reflection of individual psychology rather than of socially constructed institutions, an argument which naturalized laissez-faire principles.

The social science that emerged out of this history has traditionally been structured around simple binary oppositions of past vs. present, idiographic vs. nomothetic study, civilization vs. barbarism, and humans vs. nature. Scholars now find that these oppositions have diminished utility and in many cases that they inhibit the development of true and useful statements about the world. Much of social science imitated the concerns of the physical and life sciences, but today even the natural sciences have started to favor nonlinearity over linearity and complexity over simplification. While social science clings to the illusion of neutrality, the sciences now accept that measurers change what is measured, and even some mathematicians prefer qualitative to quantitative explanations

New currents in the social sciences draw on postmodern theories of difference to evaluate technological achievements in relation to other values, champion local knowledge, and explore the ways in which claims about universality obscured particular allegiances to hierarchies rooted in gender and race. Contemporary area studies and identity studies have been relentlessly interdisciplinary, recognizing that claims of

universality often mask the interests of a socially and historically dominant particular, and treating all knowledge as partial, perspectival, and interested without giving up a commitment to forms of objectivity that are relational.

The authors propose that we need a social science that 1) refuses the ontological distinction between humans and nature, 2) refuses to accept the nation state as the primary locus of individual and collective identity, 3) embraces tensions between the particular and the universal and the one and the many as a permanent feature of human society, and 4) adopts methods that require mastery of multi-lingual and inter-cultural understanding.

#### The Colorblind Disciplining of Race

For all of its perceptive analyses of the disciplines, Open the Social Sciences underestimates the importance of what Craig Haney calls “the psychology of silence” about race. The one part of the book that makes direct reference to race notes the importance of cultural studies “among persons involved in the new quasi-disciplines relating to the ‘forgotten’ peoples of modernity (those neglected by virtue of gender, race, class etc.) for whom it provided a theoretical (‘postmodern’) framework for their elaborations of difference.” This language is inadequate and misleading, but it does point to the importance of the ways of knowing that emanate from the experiences, political mobilizations, and works of expressive culture from suppressed, oppressed, submerged and emergent social groups. As Nestor Garcia-Canclini argues in Hybrid Cultures, traditional methodologies in both the social sciences and the humanities have encouraged us to study the scientific, the secular, and the sacred as discrete and mutually exclusive spheres, to distinguish between “traditional” and “modern” forms, and to treat high

culture, folk traditions, and commercial culture as competitors rather than as mutually constitutive nodes in networks of social and cultural practices. Yet important and exciting work has started to emerge across the disciplines that subjects these traditional verities to new and exciting scrutiny. Ethnic studies scholars working in anthropology and sociology draw upon literary and cultural theory to question the relationship between researchers and their research, to explore the functions of metaphors and dramatic tropes in their own reading and writing, and to think about the degree to which seemingly transparent and unmediated evidence about society can be culture bound. At the same time, humanities scholars are starting to explore more extensively the social and economic matrices in which cultural production, distribution, and reception take place, to examine the role of culture as a register of otherwise invisible social experiences and aspirations, and to see the ways in which social science methods designed to study micro-social events and practices can lend insight into macro-social structures of power. Even more important, studies of taste cultures and artistic hierarchies or of the connections linking place, time, memory, and action have commanded the attention of scholars from both social science and humanities backgrounds.

In the social sciences, the scholarship of Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and David Harvey (among others) has called attention to the connection between contemporary cultural expressions and the profound dislocation of social relations engendered by globalization. A widespread sensation of the compression of time and space encouraged by the reach and scope of new communications technologies enables abstract meaning systems to take on even more importance as links between local and global experiences. Arjun Appadurai, for example, identifies abstract circuits of

information and identity as central to cognitive mapping of the contemporary world not in terms of cities, states, and nations, but as ethnoscaples, mediascaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples. Like much of contemporary scholarship, this work calls into question many traditional concerns of the social sciences including traditional historical periodization and the focus on the market, civil society, and the state as the key sites of social activity. These new realities and social relations challenge traditional academic disciplinary paradigms because they rupture the relationship between culture and place by recognizing that is now quite difficult for most people to identify the social structures that shape their lives or to comprehend in any meaningful way how they belong to something called "society." Women of Color feminism exemplified in the writings of Kimberle Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Chela Sandoval, Lisa Lowe, and Andrea Smith has been especially valuable in theorizing new dynamic and fluid forms of identity, identification, affiliation and association that account for historical differences without reifying them into essentialized essences. All politics is about identity, but not all politics is identity politics. In Women of Color feminism, people to draw their identities from their politics rather than drawing their politics from their identities.