Nostalgic Social Science

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Ian McAllister, Steve Dowrick and Riaz Hassan (eds)
THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL SCIENCES IN AUSTRALIA
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This handsome volume purports to be an ‘overview of the current state of social-science research about Australia at the beginning of the twenty-first century’. Its editors have assembled a broad, if less than representative, group of specialists, most of whom comment on aspects of one of three fields declared, by editorial fiat, to constitute contemporary social science: economics, political science, and sociology. While acknowledging the immense diversity in the social sciences, the editors briskly assert that ‘the majority of universities in the advanced societies and the majority of the academic staff who work within them, are organised around, and identify themselves by [these] disciplinary labels’.

What may be viewed as the ‘Theravada’ approach of the Handbook’s editors stands in stark contrast to the ‘Mahayana’ view of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. The Academy is made up of four specialist panels that include: anthropology, demography, geography, linguistics, sociology; accounting, economics, economic history, statistics; history, law, philosophy, political science; and education, psychology, social medicine. In determining what (or whom) should fall within the broad boundaries of the social sciences, has the Academy got it wrong, or the Handbook?

Most modern universities moved long ago to mainstream interdisciplinary social sciences, humanities and related discourses at undergraduate and graduate levels. The programmes thus developed are eclectic, many of them creatively so. They include programmes such as ethnic studies, gender and queer studies, postmodern and post-colonial (or subaltern) studies, area studies (e.g., Asian Studies), ‘studies in the Western tradition’, international studies, comparative cultural studies, development studies, legal studies, mass- and multi-media and communication studies, business and marketing studies, public policy studies, public advocacy studies, management studies, teacher education, nursing and paramedical studies, tourism and hospitality studies. Some (e.g., gender studies) have built new bodies of theory and data, offering fresh perspectives on old and seemingly intractable problems, such as patriarchy. Others (e.g., nursing studies, teacher education, or social work) are vocationally focused and oriented towards action research, credentialing graduates for careers that are taking on an enhanced professionalism.

Of course, there are grounds for criticising these curricula. Not a few are rabidly instrumental — training rather than educating students (they should probably be doing both). Some are philosophically and morally bankrupt. Others — like a few of the old social sciences — are reductive and doctrinaire. But when they move beyond reductionism, instrumentalism and ideology, the insights they offer into globalisation’s myriad challenges are unsurpassed. In Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education (1997), Martha Nussbaum expounds a philosophical pedagogy and surveys educational practices, confirming that interdisciplinary courses are more relevant than old economics, political science and sociology (and old humanities) curricula operating within narrow academic constraints. So from the outset the Handbook’s ‘tripartite’ characterising of the social sciences appears old-fashioned — nostalgic rather than pedagogically progressive.

Nonetheless, it still comes as a shock that history and philosophy are excluded from the Handbook. No doubt it will be argued that these are humanities disciplines, outside the pale of social scientificity. But this would be to ignore the profound advances in epistemology that have taken the social sciences and the humanities well beyond the bad old positivism of the 1950s and 1960s. We don’t have to be relativists to know that most of our understandings of human individuals and groups are highly contingent and dynamically informed by interpretative frameworks that have moved well beyond realist and neo-realist discourses. Social sciences that are not intimately informed by history, epistemology, ontology and ethics — and by literature, languages and the arts, for that matter — are simply inadequate. The current debates in Australia about the so-called ‘history wars’ should make us all very conscious of the personal, political and cultural ramifications that flow from our scholarly imaginings of society and culture. To fragment this understanding reductively into discrete specialist areas is to distort — even damage — it very seriously.

To be fair, a handful of essays in the Handbook cleverly address important interdisciplinary areas in the contemporary social sciences — e.g., Chilla Bulbeck on gender perspectives, Stephen Bell and John Ravenhill on political economy, Christine Inglis on race, ethnicity and immigration, Gary D. Bouma on religion and spirituality. But the bulk of the essays survey conventional sub-disciplines within each of the three areas identified by the editors as quintessentially the social sciences. So far as interdisciplinary areas are included, they are mostly interpreted within one of these designated social science areas. There is little evidence that interdisciplinarity is either understood or welcome in the Handbook’s attempt to present an authoritative statement on what is (or should be) dignified by the title of social science in, and about, Australia.

Psychology’s absence from the volume is also startling. Perhaps its old behaviouralist reputation explains its exclusion. But this betrays an outdated and narrow understanding of psychology. It would be reasonable to ask why economics is included if psychology is excluded. Driven largely by neo-
liberal and/or econometric paradigms, contemporary economics is arguably at least as positivist as contemporary psychology, perhaps more so. This is not, however, to argue that economics should be out of the Handbook, but that psychology should be in it. Both disciplines will eventually catch up with post-positivism. The Handbook has missed an opportunity to hasten this necessary development.

While there is a great reservoir of social science data, and some social science theorising, about Australia in each chapter in the Handbook, most of it is interpreted within wider ‘late modern’ or ‘Western’ theoretical and methodological discourses. On this myopic reading, Australia is a peripheral, if curious, example of something distantly placed from the centre. This is intellectual cringing at its worst. While issues such as Aboriginality and multiculturalism (arguably two of three distinctive features of the Australian experience, the third being our proximity to Asia) are touched on in a number of chapters, they are never centrally elaborated into something that may evolve into a fertile theorising of our distinctiveness and its regional and global relevance. Does this mean that Australia’s distinctiveness is minimal, even non-existent? It does suggest that a form of blinkering may be going on in the social sciences on display here, particularly where their practitioners conceive of their disciplines in terms of the dated tripartism and residual positivism that constitute the structure and influence the contents of this volume.

So what are the Handbook’s editors really up to? Are they proposing an orthodox consensus for the social sciences in Australia (or even an Australian social science)? If they are dictating a magisterial template — a correct line — for the social sciences in contemporary Australia, the Handbook will be a failure. It amounts to little more than a variable collection of sometimes unadventurous surveys by specialists about their academic specialties. Who wants to pay $175 for what will quickly come to be read as a passé and selective mix of nostalgia and big-noting?

Australia needs good social scientists capable of researching and teaching at world-class levels about how a small country with an unsophisticated economy, a ramshackle federal system and a remarkably pluralistic society can come to grips with its geo-political location in a rapidly globalising world. Seen from this perspective, the Handbook doesn’t offer us much help or hope at all.