

Steindl, Josef

Article

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Note on the Fragmentation of Disciplines*

Josef Steindl

It has been observed by many that the social sciences are handicapped by, amongst other things, a reluctance to co-operate with each other: The disciplines are watertight compartments. This involves a comparative sterility, especially in view of the demands of society for the treatment and solution of certain problems, which require interdisciplinary co-operation.

It seems to me that the situation is not getting better, in fact, worse, since there is a tendency to split the traditional disciplines, like sociology and economics, further into equally watertight compartments.

An example of this is the development of econometrics into a subject of its own. The need for specialisation cannot be questioned, but the split which occurred here is far greater than can be justified by functional considerations. The fact is that these two groups, economists and econometricians, have developed into closed sets which communicate very little (the journals reflect this division) and which share few interests. The econometricians care little for economic policy or for the collection and careful interpretation of data (what you might call the "textual criticism" of the applied statistician), nor do they care, in many cases, for economic problems at all. They concentrate either on method (which in this way tends to become an end in itself) or on formal problems (Ragnar Frisch spoke of "playo-metrics" as long ago as 1956).¹ The bulk of economists are unable to understand the econometricians and to make use of their work. I think that originally, at its inception, econometrics was conceived as something different, as a tool of economics.

Another split has been developing more recently. In view of the fact that a great part of economics has been emptied of all social (or "societal", political, institutional) contents, there is now a move to establish a new subject (with new chairs, to be sure) called "political economy" or "economics of power" which no doubt will exclude the work of the other economists as much as vice versa. This parody of social science is of course connected with another division, which is now a century old: The split between Marxism and the ordinary academic economics (in the West). The non-communication between these groups has done very much harm to both of them.

* Der Text entspricht dem Original. Es wurden nur Tippfehler korrigiert.

A similar split has been observed in sociology where the empirical approach of Lazarsfeld and others, and the philosophical or analytical approach have tended to become separate subjects, which exclude each other. Perhaps similar tendencies may be found in other social sciences with which I am less familiar (for example, psychology).

What are the reasons? On the face of it, they have something to do with the organisation of our Universities, which fosters the autonomy of subjects.² More basically, the fragmentation is a symptom of aimlessness of the social sciences, they are not "necessary" for society in the way natural science is; in so far as they do have functions they are profoundly affected by the divisions of society, or by the wish to retreat from them into an ivory tower.

If the social sciences would be faced by common tasks such as engineers and scientists had in the work for the space programme of NASA the isolation and fragmentation would be very effectively countered. Social science policy, if it could set on foot such research projects, might therefore go a long way in establishing interdisciplinary co-operation. It is for this reason, amongst others, that the Austrian side has suggested to OECD the initiation of international research projects of a type which would be socially relevant and would require interdisciplinary co-operation, such as, for example, the problem of migration which is of very great concern to governments and others.

April 1973

Endnotes

- ¹ It is a general defect of our education that it does not help the student (or pupil) to establish a connection between the things he learns in various subjects. The kind of attitude thus created continues naturally in the orientation and organization of research, and in the establishment of new disciplines.
- ² It is recognized that interdisciplinary co-operation, enforced by the terms of a research contract, is often a sham if the persons concerned are not keen on co-operation. This will not be the case, however, if the work cannot be carried out without co-operation, because of the design of a research programme which sets concrete tasks which are otherwise impossible to fulfill. This presupposes, of course, a well thought out research programme.
It is always possible, moreover, to assure co-operation by the choice of the research team.