

'Re-inventing' the Teaching of Political Science :

A Paradigm Shift in Our Approach, Strategies and Solutions

Sandeep Shastri

Director, International Academy for Creative Teaching

52, Bellary Road, Hebbal, Bangalore 560 024

Tel: (080)23545249 Fax: (080) 23545247

Email:sshastri@eth.net

Scientific discoveries and their technological applications introduce major social transformations: migrations, overall employment structures, ways of life and socio-cultural behaviour and relations with the environment, to name but a few. It is of primary importance to understand and foresee these transformations so that their positive potential can be enhanced and their possible negative impacts mitigated. The 21st century will need the full contribution of the social sciences for this task.

World Social Science Report

Having been a student who focused attention on the study of Indian politics for the last three decades¹, I have often been asked this question - 'What ails the Social Sciences?'. This question is sometimes asked with a sense of bewilderment, at times with an air of contempt and at other times with downright pity and sympathy. Yes, I often wonder 'What ails the Social Sciences?'. The answer to this question is often rendered in an extremely simplistic fashion. Such answers often take us along the wrong path. When diagnosing what ails the Social Sciences, we often mistake the symptom for the disease.

For me, the ailment is essentially the by-product of social attitudes and prejudices which have triggered off a chain of reactions and consequences which cause the present malaise. This attitude accounts for the decline in enrolment (both in quality and quantity) in the graduate and post graduate programmes in the social sciences. Further, the status and position of the social sciences in the school curriculum has also contributed to this trend. The two factors are not independent but closely linked.

It is important to reflect on the way society views the social sciences. More often than not it is seen as an easy option for those who do not wish to/ considered not capable of working hard. The

societal premium on the natural and physical sciences – more specifically medicine and the various shades of engineering, is a direct corollary of the dominant social mood prevalent for quite some time now. This mood clearly indicates that competence and capacity are reflected in a person being trained to be a doctor, an engineer, a chartered accountant or at least a pure science or commerce graduate, necessarily in that order.

It is also important to record the way social science and more specifically civics, is situated in the school curriculum and the space they are provided in the teaching/learning process². I sometimes wonder whether they were included in the scheme of things (syllabus) as a belated afterthought, a forgotten outpost that is simply 'there' because it has to be there. I often get the reaction in schools today, 'Anybody can teach the social sciences'³. I do not deny the fact that the caliber and capacity of those who teach the social sciences leaves much to be desired. I have often found that Social Science teachers at the school level are either the most popular or least popular teachers. There are none along the middle path! This is linked to the larger picture I painted earlier. A few take to the social sciences by choice or because of their deep interest in and passion for the discipline. Others (the vast majority) take it because they have no other choice or they were socialized into believing that science and commerce were too difficult for them.

It is in this backdrop that the students enter the social science stream at the undergraduate level. Most college lecturers would agree that as the new batch of students enter the classroom, neither their (students) morale nor their self esteem is very high. Most of them are convinced that their lack of capacity has brought them where they are. The highly motivated who took to the course by choice would be a microscopic minority and they are often inspired to pursue the course because of the deep and passionate interest in the subject. Sadly, in some of their cases, their enthusiasm dips when they dialogue with their peers or are taught the course in an uninspiring way and in some cases even because of the low order of priority their course is given in the grand educational design of the college.

I would like to emphasize four points at this stage before I proceed any further. All these are linked to the discipline of political science in particular and the social sciences in general.

Firstly, where are the professional openings for a (good) political science graduate/post-graduate today? The openings are many. Firstly, they could enter active politics; secondly they could enter the civil service; thirdly, they could be recruited by Non Governmental Organisation (NGOs); fourthly, they could enter international organizations; fifthly, they could take to research and teaching. The list could go on, but I am just highlighting the five key areas. I would like to raise a question at this stage. In all the above areas highlighted, how many social science graduates do you have? In reality, save in the last area (teaching and research), a majority of the positions are occupied by those who do not have a formal social science degrees. This implies two things. Firstly, in the professional

areas which fall within the domain of political science graduates, they are facing stiff competition from non-social science graduates. Those who are not social scientists are actually being selected to these positions. Secondly, what implication does this have for the type of training that political science graduates are being given to prepare them for these professional avenues or are their skills so limited that in spite of the training during their degree and post graduate courses they were unable to compete with the non-social science graduates. Today with globalization and liberalization, a vast array of opportunities is opening up for political science graduates. Are they equipped to be absorbed in these positions or would employers still prefer to take non-social science graduates for these positions. My lurking suspicion is that the answer to the question would lie in the second choice. Are our political science graduates unemployed or unemployable? This is a difficult and uncomfortable question that we must ask and at some stage answer.

Secondly, it would also be relevant to trace the profile of those who take political science at the graduation and post graduation level. They are increasingly coming from the vernacular language stream. This of course makes them no less competent. Given the fact that much of the latest literature is available only in English, it puts these students at a clear disadvantage. Further, their exposure to English is limited and in this age of globalization, familiarity with this language is critical in the professional world or else the students options get severely limited. Further, students who take to the social sciences are more often than not those from economically less privileged sections. They have often not opted for the other streams, because of their financial position. This, many a time creates a psychological block and the students often have very limited aims and goals.

Thirdly, the syllabus in most political science courses is not fully linked to the ground reality. Very often the study begins with the global and then come down to the local rather than starting with the local and moving on to the global. It is for this reason that students often cannot relate to the issues being taught. While it is important for students to know what is happening in the United States of America, United Kingdom and Europe, it is more important that they are sensitized to what is going on in their own country and their own local areas. Further, the learning method is invariably the lecture style with very little focus on other forms of learning. This makes the knowledge garnering process essentially a transfer of information from the notes of the teacher to the notes of the students which is released again onto the examination answer paper, without often engaging the critical mind of the student. Further, there is also limited flexibility in the syllabus. Unless it is a premier institution, students do not have the option to take courses from other disciplines. Should we not provide, at the under graduate level, the option for a history students to take a course on the History of Science which may be offered in a Science department or can a commerce student be allowed to take a course on Political Economy of India being offered by the Political Science/Economic department? At the post graduate level, can students be allowed to take an optional subject not from their parent

discipline, say a Political Science student taking one course in Statistics or Economics or Philosophy? This would permit the student to take a course he/she is interested in rather than forcibly take courses in subjects that are compulsorily prescribed. This suggestion can be criticized on the ground that it caters only to the needs of the so called 'bright' or motivated student but what about the others. This is a valid criticism but the solution seeks to address one dimension of the problem and the other facets of the challenge would need to be dealt with independently.

Finally, it is important to ask the question as to how many of the students who complete their bachelor's degree with political science as an optional or do their Masters in Political Science take up professional responsibilities directly linked to the course they studied. A survey of students that complete their post graduation would show that more than 70 -75% would be in jobs or professions not linked (directly or incidentally) to the subject in which they did their master's degree⁴. This raises the question as to whether a post graduate degree is pursued merely to, as a colleague of mine stated, postpone their unemployment⁵!

This brings me to the end of this narrative. How do we reinvent the Social Sciences and re-assert their presence in the domain of higher education. As mentioned in the beginning there is no simple quick fix solution. There needs to a long term solution and a short term strategy. The short term strategy would be to re-design the curriculum in political science to make it more realistic and relevant to the needs of the learner. I would also add as a footnote that we need to ensure that the teaching methods become more creative and we make the learning process a true journey of discovery. We could also experiment with allowing students to choose from a much wider menu – a la 'cafeteria' style as is being done in premier institutions. I am willing to concede the point that given the way the system works many who visit the cafeteria may not be able to exercise the choice or would actually prefer a 'set menu', but the change can be introduced incrementally.

In the long run, society needs to be sensitized to the centrality of the social sciences in any 'knowledge society'. This new way of thinking is vital to re-vitalize the social sciences. Ultimately the order of priority in a society is defined in terms of the value preferences of those who are part of that society. All other forms of change will be peripheral with limited impact if the approach of society and its attitude to the social sciences does not undergo a meaningful and realistic change.

(Footnotes)

¹ I was privileged to take the 'Arts' as a specialization even as I entered the 9th Grade. I belonged to the last batch of the All India Higher Secondary, where students had to specialize in Arts, Science or Commerce in the 9th Standard itself.

² It is heartening to note that the nomenclature has undergone a change from Civics to Political Science at the school level in the CBSE.

³ The Karnataka government has taken the right decision to include the Indian Constitution as a compulsory paper for Undergraduates. In the implementation of this scheme, many Universities have decided that any teacher – Science, Commerce, Language, Social Science or anyone can teach this paper. Those who do not have the minimum work load are being assigned this paper. This is a pathetic reflection of the attitude that anyone can teach the social sciences or maybe no one need teach topics relating to the social sciences as they are self evident truths!!!

⁴ When making this comment at a Seminar, there was an interesting response from a former IIT Director. In his comments he pointed out that a similar trend is seen in IIT graduates and argued that more than 70% of them too are not working in the specialization area they graduated in! This fact does not however undermine the main point being made.

⁵ I would like to thank my colleague Dr Rajendra Joshi for having brought up this point in a discussion.

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