

The crisis in the social sciences

For many years LSE has been leading the international and global field in accumulating data and theories about every aspect of the human world. And each year the data becomes more comprehensive and more reliable, the theories more robust, more simple, and more watertight. Errors are rooted out, exceptions explained, theoretical coherence sharpened, and the precise cutting tools of analysis honed to a finer and finer edge. Incremental social science has not only hit the ground running, but has continued to run with such speed that it is now whizzing through hyperspace at greater and greater velocities, whilst the rest of the world desperately tries to keep up. What is on the radar is the end of uncertainty as we know it. Already much of existing dilettante social science has been disproved, and the working group on concrete universals has not only proved that Hegel was incorrect, but is on the brink of proving that there was no such person or that even if there were, it was a mistake. Within the foreseeable future, and probably even before the oil runs out, we will have a final version of the human social project to match that of the human genome. LSE will have produced the final and authoritative account of everything, or at least everything worth having an account of.

And that is the problem. Once there is nothing more of any significance to know, there will be no research of any significance to carry out, no seminars worth conducting, no funding bodies who think there is anything worth funding, no articles worth writing, no books or journals worth reading. Anything that needs to be known will be on the databases of the Research Councils, and when you need them, they will be only a mouse click away. It will be not so much a matter of knowing the place for the first time, as knowing it for the last time. The School will be like a group of doctors when the last disease has been eradicated and the world made safe from accidents of all kinds. Absolute and total academic redundancy will have been achieved.

Faced with this prospect of species extinction, social scientists at LSE have launched the Discord Project. The project is a development from the earlier Bayesian Academic Best Employment Longevity pilot (BABEL) which the Methuselah

Foundation so generously funded at the start of the millennium, and which looked at available scenarios for academic employment beyond the year 2040. Discord aims to keep the universities, or at least this one, open by reintroducing uncertainty, ambiguity, and confusion into the social sciences. When Discord is fully rolled out and comprehensively on stream, there will be nothing that it has not turned upside down and inside out, and it will involve all of the School's departments. The Mathematics Department is currently leading the way with its slogan '2 + 2 = 5 for extremely large values of 2', but Geography is close behind with its ESRC funded project on 'Does America really exist?' Ground breaking (and mould breaking) courses are already being test run in the Department of Rule and Rebellion. Uncertainty is all, and the department has cancelled all of its existing courses, and introduced two compulsory first year undergraduate counter-factual modules: Charles Edward Stuart XIV and the Government of Scotland in the 20th Century,

and The Soviet Commonwealth of Great Britain, 1921 to the Present. These will be followed in years two and three by You Are What You Eat: diet as the determinant of voting and Climate and Constitutions: the influence of precipitation on politics.

Meanwhile the library has introduced the creative doubt scheme. Any book which has been borrowed will, on being returned, be placed in a locked vault and all reference to it in the catalogue erased. No one will ever be certain again that they have read what they think they have read, since no learning experience will be repeatable. The world will, each day, become newer and more unknown, and so more open to exploration. The universities will flourish, and LSE's old motto will be replaced with *Castores? Quis castores sunt?* ('Beavers? What are beavers?') But of course by the time you read this, that too will have been replaced. ■

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