

# A Critical Essay on the Making of Social Sciences in The Occident and The Illustrative Case of The Migration Studies

## Batı'da Sosyal Bilimlerin Yapılışı Hakkında Eleştirel Deneme ve Göç Çalışmalarının Betimleyici Vakası

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### Abstract

The Occidental mindset and trends shape the social sciences at global level. This mindset, particularly in quantitative methods, puts an extreme emphasis on the use of statistics and mathematics in social sciences which in turn bears the risk of a determinist and reductionist approach to social phenomena. Moreover, the widespread and complex use of formulas and statistics further complicate the accessibility of ordinary citizens to science and knowledge. The almost compulsory use of theory is another feature of this mindset. Although there can be benefits of theories, the use of theory shall not be inflicted as a sine qua non in the study of social phenomena. There are Occidental scientists such as Chomsky, Dennis, Hambrick, Biggart, Avison who criticize the theory obsession. Besides these, although scientific objectivity is largely claimed in the Occidental scientific milieu, there are financial considerations, methodological blinders and other potential biases which can hamper this objectivity. In this respect, a critical regard to the migration studies in the Occident provides certain examples of financial dependency, methodological blinders and other potential sources of bias which pose a threat to the scientific impartiality.

**Keywords:** Methodological blinders, migration studies, occidental mindset, scientific objectivity, social sciences, theory obsession

### Öz

Güncel Batılı zihniyet ve eğilimler, sosyal bilimleri küresel düzeyde şekillendirmektedir. Bu zihniyet, özellikle nicel yöntemlerde, sosyal bilimlerde istatistik ve matematiğin kullanımına aşırı vurgu yapar ve bu yöntem de beraberinde sosyal olgulara determinist ve indirgemeci bir yaklaşım riski ihtiva eder. Ayrıca, sosyal bilimlerde matematik ve istatistiğin aşırı ve karmaşık kullanımı, sıradan vatandaşların sosyal bilimleri ve bu alandaki araştırmaları anlamalarını da zorlaştırmaktadır. Öte yandan, batılı sosyal bilimlerde teori kullanımı bir zorunluluk olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Sosyal bilimlerde teorilerin yararları olduğu açıktır ancak sosyal olayların incelenmesinde teoriler olmazsa olmaz olarak görülmemelidir. Nitekim, Chomsky, Dennis, Hambrick, Biggart, Avison gibi bazı Batılı bilim insanları da teori saplantısına karşı çıkmaktadır. Bunların yanı sıra, Batılı bilim çevrelerinde büyük ölçüde bilimsel nesnellığe bağlı kaldığı iddia edilse de, bu nesnellığı engelleyebilecek finansal bağımlılıklar, metodolojik körlükler ve diğer olası önyargılar da vardır. Batı'daki göç çalışmalarına eleştirel bir bakış bu bağlamda bilimsel tarafsızlığa tehdit oluşturan finansal bağımlılık, metodolojik körlükler ve diğer potansiyel önyargı kaynaklarına ilişkin veriler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Batılı zihniyet, Bilimsel tarafsızlık, Göç çalışmaları, Metodolojik körlük, Sosyal bilimler, Teori saplantısı

### Introduction

The social sciences are ontologically different from the natural sciences and are prone to subjectivity despite all efforts and claims of scientific objectivity. The social sciences in the Occident as well are not exempted from this potential deficiency. This essay aims to bring some general remarks and critiques to the making of social sciences in the Occident. In this respect, the exaggerate use of statistics and mathematics in social sciences, ethical problems with regard to the funding of social sciences, theory obsession, potential impediments to the scientific objectivity and certain methodological blinders will be addressed. Within the framework of this essay, as an illustrative case, the critique of the migration studies in the Occident will be made on the basis of ethical issues in securing funding, methodological blinders and other sources of potential biases.

## **Exaggerate Use of Statistics and Mathematics in Social Sciences**

The political and economic superiority of the Occident shapes the evolution of social sciences in the global plane. Some scholars qualify this process as academic dependency (Alatas 2003, p. 599-613) or even as academic imperialism (Alatas 2000, p. 23-45). For instance, it is a fact that the western curriculum weighs intensively in the former colonies' education systems (Ho 1990; Coll and Taylor 2012, p. 771-772).

In the Occidental scientific milieu, an increasing tendency in statistization and mathematization of social sciences (Sarukkai 1995; Hartmann and Sprenger 2011), which in turn influences other developing countries' academic curriculum and research orientations (Hunter 2014), is observed. It is obvious that social sciences can and should benefit from statistics, mathematics or any other appropriate science. But the extreme and exaggerated use of these techniques not only spoils the soul of social sciences but also, maybe more importantly, makes it less comprehensible and accessible for the ordinary citizen. The shapes, diagrams, charts, formulas, geometrical designs etc. give the impression that the subject under study is so complicated that it is not understandable by an ordinary mindset, that a certain high-level educational background is needed to fully and correctly comprehend the issue and that also a great and 'unattainable' expertise is required to prepare such a study. To a certain extent, the social scientists' desire to valorize their professions with a corporatist logic and professional jealousy is admissible and respectable. However, this should not be done at the expense of the accessibility to the science and knowledge itself.

In addition to this, excessive use of jargon in social sciences, some bizarre baptizing of theories and re-inventing arty names for some concepts, most of which are already identified and named previously in the past by different disciplines, are only professional aberrations and as a result diminish the interest of people in science (Grabmeier 2020).

### **Funding Issues**

Funding issues with regard to the research projects play also an important role in the expansion of quantitative methodologies in social sciences which employ largely statistics and mathematics. Those who pay a certain quantity of money wish to see in return a quantifiable result. The capitalist logic works in this way and transforms the social sciences into a 'quantifiable object'. This capitalist cycle tries to reproduce and expand itself without cessation in the scientific field as well. This is comparable to the principle of 'polluter-payer'. As it keeps the money, the capitalist logic sees in itself the right to pollute and later cleans its conscience via paying. The objective should be to prevent or at least to minimize the pollution, not to legitimize it through paying. The social sciences shall not be polluted and later cleared in a vicious cycle with such mechanisms. The goal of the science is to serve people and strive for the well-being of humanity, and not merely for the interests of a class, a group of people or an institution, including the states (Gläser, J., Ash, M., Buenstorf, G. et al., 2021, p. 105-109).

### **Occidental Cultural Background**

Another reason for the statistization and mathematization of social sciences is the occidental cultural background. Positivist and materialist point of view require measurable values in social sciences, like in natural sciences, in order to understand and analyze a social phenomenon. The pioneers of the mathematization in the social sciences also developed measurement theory that admits as its starting point the idea that science is crucially about measurement. Contrary to this tradition, it has been argued and claimed that the subject matter of the social sciences does not necessarily require the level of precision demanded by the natural sciences, and that the social sciences are, and should, rather be inexact (Hartmann and Sprenger 2011, p. 4-5).

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It should be noted that, in the Occident, the word 'science' is used for both natural sciences and social sciences. However, in some oriental cultures these two separate sciences are defined with two different words where each has its own connotations. Nevertheless, it is also possible to encounter the use of a separate term for another category of social sciences in the Occident as well, namely the humanities.

### **Theory Obsession**

The Occidental mindset in the making of social sciences is clearly different from the Oriental mindset. Each reasoning style has its own advantages and disadvantages. The Oriental mindset privileges mostly a verbal explanatory logic. The use of a theory is not a must. Logical and consistent reasoning is considered sufficient instead of the sacred theory testing. The use of basic statistics and mathematics calculations is possible where appropriate. On the other side, the Occidental mindset, particularly in the quantitative research, privileges a mathematical explanatory logic through complex statistical measurements. Moreover, theories are considered indispensable in the making process of social sciences.

It is generally accepted that the purpose, or at least the main purpose, of science is to explain, or perhaps to explain and predict (Purtill 1970, p. 301). The main duty of the social scientist is to understand a social phenomenon, analyze it and explain its causes and results in an objective and comprehensive manner. His/Her role is not necessarily to make deterministic generalizations or make predictions based on his studies or experiences. In this regard, Kauffman, Thurner, Hanel, Hossenfelder underline the limits of scientific predictions and models (Kauffman, Thurner, Hanel 2008; Hossenfelder 2020), while Shuttleworth draws attention to the issues which bear the risk to compromise the integrity of the scientists making predictions (Shuttleworth 2009). It should also be added that there are already non-academic institutions, like think-tanks, which make speculations and predictions. Furthermore, the social scientist is not a fortune-teller whose predictions generally fail. Can't a social scientist make predictions? Sure, s/he can but the main aim of the social sciences is not this.

In the Occidental mindset, although it is accepted à priori that the theories are not capable of explaining everything with regard to a studied issue, in reality and de facto they are considered like a 'law' to be employed to explain the studied issue. However, by nature each theory is insufficient to explain a social phenomenon which is unique in a certain time, space, culture and emotional atmosphere. No social phenomenon is completely identical with another. Even if we consider that everything is identical (including place, time, people, causes) in two social phenomena, there is no guarantee that we will have the same results. Therefore, although generalizations obtained from theories can be useful, the use of theory should not be seen as a must. Furthermore, the conclusions of some theories can also be induced or deduced by simple reasoning itself. In the Occident as well, there are academics who argue that theory should not be imposed as a must (Avison and Malaurent 2014; Biggart 2016; Dennis 2019; Hambrick 2007). For instance, American linguist Noam Chomsky's statement on the issue is as follows: "...I don't think the term theory should be applied to fields as intellectually thin as the social sciences. There's just some common sense observations...In the world of human affairs, I don't think there's much in the way of theory..."<sup>1</sup>

### **Methodological And Other Blinders: The Illustrative Case Of Migration Studies**

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<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky's lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzvWVFAwPUU>. Accessed: 29.6.2022. See also [Eugene Wolters](#), 9 August 2013. Did Noam Chomsky Just Accidentally Provide A Warranted Response To Zizek?. Available at <http://www.critical-theory.com/noam-chomsky-accidentally-provide-warranted-response-zizek/>. Accessed: 29.6.2022.

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There are certain methodological blinders which influence profoundly the making of the social sciences in the Occident. In this regard, Wimmer and Schiller, in their article titled *Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences*, make reference to the methodological nationalism as a blinder encompassing the social sciences in the Occident. They recount three variants of methodological nationalism, namely ignorance, naturalization and territorial delimitation; and highlight that they intersect and mutually reinforce each other in modern social sciences. They also add that the methodological nationalism influenced the postwar definition of international migration and immigrant integration (Wimmer and Schiller 2002, p. 308).

It should also be underlined that, apart from the methodological nationalism which pushed the migration studies to consider the immigrants potential threats for social order (Wimmer and Schiller 2002, p. 317), the ethnocentric and the eurocentric points of view are other significant blinders for the social sciences in the Occident. The ethnocentric and eurocentric approaches shape inevitably the migration studies and the migrant image in the Occident. In this respect, probably in the future, research to be conducted on the current Syrian and Ukrainian refugee issues may provide a invaluable opportunity and data to compare the research orientations and findings in the Occident on different categories of migrants and refugees.

### **Impediments To The Scientific Objectivity: The Illustrative Case Of Migration Studies**

It should be noted that the social sciences in the Occident, including the approaches which prevail the quantitative methods and consider the researchers simply external observant to the studied social phenomenon, cannot escape from certain impediments to the scientific objectivity, such as political bias or funding related bias. In this regard, the controversy between refugee studies scholarship and migration studies scholarship is symbolically

illustrative. James C. Hathaway, in his article titled *Forced Migration Studies: Could We Agree Just to 'Date'?*, underlines that

"...the shift to focus on a phenomenon—'forced migration'—rather than on the personal—'refugee'—seems eerily to correspond with preferred governmental and agency agendas which increasingly sacrifice the autonomy of the refugee himself or herself to broader migratory management goals... This lack of a rights-based orientation in forced migration studies is at the very least comforting to both governmental and agency agendas which have sought to reconceive the refugee population as little more than a manifestation of broader problems to be solved. If I am correct in thinking that these risks are real, it may make sense to reconsider the conceptual marriage of refugee studies scholarship and migration studies scholarship... At the risk of overstating the point, the goal has been to render the refugee as much a migrant as possible... The focus of much contemporary discourse is instead on the importance of defining and pursuing so-called 'durable solutions' to refugee flight." (Hathaway 2007, p. 350, 355 and 364).

Besides the controversy between the refugee studies and the migration studies, it is interesting to observe, within the migration studies itself, that there is a populist tendency to blur, consciously or unconsciously, the differences between the forced immigration and the voluntary immigration (Bakewell 2021; Carling 2014; de Haas 2021) and even at a further level the tendency to generalize the term 'human mobility' (Carling 2014; de Haas 2021), which bears the risk to replace the term 'migration' in the future.

On the other side, Joshua Hatton, in his remarkable essay titled *MARS Attacks. A Cautionary Tale from the UK on the Relation between Migration and Refugee Studies (MARS) and Migration Control*, delineates in detail the financial relationship between the governmental

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agencies and the Migration and Refugee Studies in the UK. In return for securing funding support, he explains how the academics harmed the field's human subjects by collaborating with the governmental agencies and how they legitimized the implementation of tougher anti-immigrant measures. Hatton demonstrates that this financial dependency harmed the scientific impartiality and *"obliged academics not only to make changes in their research agenda, methods, and findings, but also to engage in a sort of 'gift exchange' with their governmental patrons"* (Hatton 2018, p. 120).

## Conclusion

Ideological, political, cultural, populist or other type of biases are important impediments that shall be taken into consideration in the making process of the social sciences both in the Orient and in the Occident. In this respect, the studies, particularly in the field of migration, political science and sociology, shall be assessed with diligence not only with regard to their findings and conclusions but also to their semantics. This is mainly due to the ethical problems in securing funding and also to the potential manipulations concerning the survey and sampling methodologies which are not always easy to track.

The political, economic and cultural superiority of the Occidental mindset is still undisputable, albeit the sharp decline in its moral superiority in the eyes of the international community. Given the exponential economic development of the Orient in the last decades, the Occident might lose its dominant position in the future. However, it needs to be confessed that the Occidental mindset in social sciences has already conquered the Orient as well. A novel perspective and paradigm is required to overcome the deficiencies of the Occidental and capitalist mindset. The social scientists both in the Occident and in the Orient shall pay utmost attention to observe scientific objectivity and not to fall to the trap of methodological blinders, and also of capitalism, nationalism and other populist tendencies, all potential imminent threats, in their research.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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