

More on the value of disciplines to the social sciences: social anthropology

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Abstract. This paper also gives feedback in response to the evening of presentations about the value of different disciplines to the social sciences, at the University of Manchester. I respond to Keir Martin on the value of social anthropology. Martin flagged that an anthropologist predicted the 2007-8 global financial crisis. I present a response I anticipate from economics.

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I predicted an RNA virus and a serial killer

But that was just conversation filler

In two previous papers now (2022a,b), I have referred to an “event.” It was in the last decade. Different lecturers from different disciplines told an audience about the value of their discipline to the school of social sciences at the University of Manchester and beyond. Prompted by the event, I said something about philosophy and also the politics speech, or political science, but what about social anthropology? I often write about anthropology, so perhaps I should say something about that too.

But now that I am writing about it, I suddenly feel I don’t remember the social anthropology speech very well. It was by Keir Martin! And I remember this: it did draw my attention to the claim that an anthropologist predicted the 2007-8 global financial crisis. The value of the kind of intensive fieldwork done by anthropologists is a greater chance of predictive success apparently.

But there is an argument in economics against being able to predict financial crashes (see Levine 2012: 41). Suppose that a reliable predictor predicts a crash in one month’s time.

People would withdraw money, get rid of stock, etc., now bringing the crash forward, falsifying the prediction. However, this argument is not incompatible with anthropologists' being able to regularly predict financial crashes. If you are not taken as reliable by the general public, because of lack of visibility or you do not partake in certain conventions from which many people infer greater reliability ("Look at this smart suit," "Look at this nice graph"), then people won't act on your predictions so as to bring crashes forward.

I anticipate an economist saying that if they wanted to predict economic crashes, they cannot do it from within economics, because the discipline's overall visibility and status will not allow that, but perhaps they could from within anthropology. Actually maybe no economist would say that, but I am posting the hypothetical message into the anthropologists' in tray. ("This is not a very original paper." No, but how else to send the message? Well, there's a tempting assumption, which Martin is inviting audiences to buy into, I think, and which has not been identified before: if my social science can successfully predict crashes and yours cannot, then mine has superior understanding of people to yours.¹)

References

- Edward, T.R. 2022a. On the value of philosophers in the social sciences: fixing disciplinary constitutions. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWOTV-6>
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- Levine, D.K. 2012. *Is Behavioral Economics Doomed? The Ordinary versus the Extraordinary*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

¹ I confess I sometimes feel social anthropology and mainstream economics are not so different.