

On bringing back distinguished social scientists from the past

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Abstract. This paper disputes an assumption to do with the project of evaluating how much increase in knowledge there has been in a social science field. There is a brief pastiche of Laura Riding's *Progress of Stories* in place of the customary poem.

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“The opening week of the university year is always an exciting time for scientists, because there are free textbooks available from the library. Who would take what and how long before the effects show? A large sign above some crowded tables advertises the books, but there are also copies of journals and readers and novels too, a mixture which causes much mirth!” Moving out of pastiche mode, I took a copy of the journal *Legal Studies* yesterday. A legal article tells us:

A new collective work by a group of French social science theorists, and edited by Bernard Walliser, poses an interesting question. Do social scientists know more today than they did in the past? The question is obviously interesting in itself, but, for lawyers, it is interesting for several reasons, some positive and some negative. The positive reasons are to be found in a series of sub-questions. Do contemporary jurists know more than say Ulpian, Bartolus and Domat knew? If so, what do they know that these past lawyers did not know? (Samuel 2012: 448)

I confess that Ulpian, Bartolus, and Domat are not familiar names to me.

In a footnote we are told what an evaluator thinks: “Ulpian could sit in the House of Lords tomorrow, without a moment’s preparation...” (Birks cited in Samuel 2012: 448)¹

Reflecting on that evaluation, I would like to comment on these two questions:

- (a) Do social scientists today know more than social scientists of times past?
- (b) Imagine that a social scientist from times past is somehow brought back. Could they succeed in their field?

Concerning these questions, there is what we can perhaps misleadingly call “the natural assumption,” composed of two parts:

- (*Natural assumption*) i. If a long-deceased social scientist somehow returns and succeeds in their field today, then there has been no increase in knowledge since they died, whereas ii. if they fail, then there has been an increase in knowledge in the field.

And concerning “long-deceased,” let us say that at least four decades have passed since their death.

Response 1. Someone, possibly a toxic character, is sure to dispute the assumption as follows: success in a field may turn largely on the social side of things – “These are what academic staff and students are like today, in terms of temperament and the norms they accept. Can you navigate such a social environment?” Established field members may send out the message, “I am sure you are a very smart man, Bartolus, but this is not the place for you,” even if there has been no significant increase in the knowledge officially sought by the field. His failure is not a reliable indicator of increase.

Response 2. There is at least one other way of disputing the assumption. Suppose that a social scientist who was largely neglected in their time is somehow brought back. And his recent work is not neglected, even by citational measures. The ability of that social scientist

¹ Are there not such tricks as putting chewing gum on the seat to prevent that?

to flourish now may reflect greater knowledge in the field, which leads to fewer dismissals of his proposals. We now have the knowledge to flesh out these proposals. For example, in economics mathematical advances help. The success of the ghost today does not indicate a field in which no knowledge has been added.

References

Riding, L. 1935. *Progress of Stories*. Deyá Majorca: The Seizin Press.

Samuel, G. 2012. Is legal knowledge cumulative? *Legal Studies* 32 (3): 448-479.