



FACULTY OF
MANAGEMENT & FINANCE
UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO

Vol. 07, No. 01, June, 2016

**Colombo
Business
Journal**

International Journal
of Theory & Practice

Book Review

Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Social Research: Philosophical and Methodological Foundations*, Social Scientists' Association, 2015, Pages: vii + 657, Price: LKR 1800, ISBN: 978-955-0762-33-0

Harshana Rambukwella

Postgraduate Institute of English, Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Social Research is an ambitious book. It spans 10 sections, 27 chapters and is an intimidating 657 pages long. While it is intended to be a teaching-learning guide and an introduction to social sciences research methodologies for students of various disciplines, it is not essentially structured as a quick-access guide. Most books of this nature are designed for 'quick fixes' – offering quick-fire solutions for undergraduate or postgraduate students trying to figure out a systematic approach to research that will be recognized as legitimate within their disciplines. The ambition of Uyangoda's *Social Research* lies elsewhere as a close reading of the text suggests. Rather than a 'dry' account of methodologies and methods it provides a richly contextualized understanding of a range of approaches to research. It is this aspect that makes the book unique. Instead of offering a narrow and utilitarian vision of research, the book impels its reader to confront the ideological and political implications of research in the social sciences.

Social Research questions the data-driven, empiricist and positivist orientation of much social science research today. It critically examines the humanistic traditions from which social sciences originally evolved, the rise of positivism, and the current turn from positivistic research towards qualitative approaches, and contextualizes these changes in the epistemological orientation of social research within debates in intellectual history about the nature of knowledge and means of knowledge production. For those approaching this text from current utility-driven discourses of education, this might appear to be a weakness because the text may not seem 'practical' – for instance, it does not directly deal with how to design a research study, how to frame research questions, choose between qualitative and quantitative approaches, etc. However, it is precisely the avoidance of this 'practicality' in favor of a conceptually rich introduction to the 'why' and 'how' of research that this

reviewer finds admirable about the text. This is not to suggest that the book has limited utility value. It is written in a very accessible manner and deftly explains complex philosophical issues with clarity and economy of style. Each chapter provides a summary of its content at the end and also includes suggestions for further reading. It also provides a very useful glossary at the end which provides easy access to a range of key concepts and terms used in the social sciences and humanities.

Contextualizing *Social Research*

To contextualize this book a short reflection on contemporary tertiary education discourse is necessary. Both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world a paradigm shift, where market forces are increasingly determining both the value and direction of research and education is visible. (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000) On the one hand universities are constantly under pressure to restructure their programs to be more relevant to market needs and on the other, funding for research in the social sciences and humanities is declining rapidly. This is even so in the non-governmental sector where pure research projects are very unlikely to secure funding. Only those with a significant interventionist component or the ability demonstrate some kind of measurable outcome is likely to attract money. Within this shifting context we also see the social sciences and humanities undergoing something of an identity crisis. A high degree of specialization is the current norm, accompanied by a kind of technicist orientation. For instance, in a discipline like economics there are a large number of sub-specializations and increasingly sophisticated methods are used for research – larger questions about the conceptual basis of research or its ideological investment, however, are rarely raised.

This trend is arguably influenced by the broader context of marketization described above accompanied by a desire to emulate the hard sciences and match their truth claims. By doing so, the social sciences (and at times even some humanities disciplines) can position themselves as capable of producing tangible or measurable outcomes. But perhaps something is lost in this drive for relevancy. A careful reading of Uyangoda's *Social Research* appears to support this premise.

Social Research maintains a sustained emphasis on the human-centric nature of all social sciences and humanities research. It does not shy away from the issue of subjectivity that lies at the heart of all forms of human-related inquiry and provides a critical intellectual history of the attempts to negate this subjective element within the positivist tradition of social sciences research. The text demonstrates that disciplines, when they lose touch with some sense of the human, lose something profound. The text simultaneously establishes a link between this human-centric vision of research and a holistic approach to research. The very structure of the book, providing a detailed and patient intellectual genealogy of philosophical debates about epistemology and ontology, reflects this concern with approaching research from a broad perspective. By providing an intellectual genealogy *Social Research* educates the researcher on the conceptual and ideological premises underlying particular methodological choices and the methods of research that derive from them.

The text establishes that the social sciences are ultimately about people, either as individuals or collectives, and that they are unavoidably subjective – in both senses of the word: subjective in the sense that such research can never be truly objective or neutral and subjective in the sense that at some level it is about subjectivity or the experience of being human. The text repeatedly highlights that a technicist orientation to research is reductive and is an impoverished form of scholarly inquiry. Against such a limited vision of research, the text provides a conceptually rich account of what it

means to engage in rigorous and committed research in the social sciences and humanities. An example of this might be the work of Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. Sen's work, while grounded in empirical data, is holistic and seeks to address human questions. Sen's argument that famines are driven, not by resource scarcity but by iniquities in resource distribution, which he in turn relates to a deficit of democracy is one instance of the insights that can be generated by a holistic vision. (Sen, 1999) He argues, perhaps contentiously, that democratic societies rarely experience famine because people have the ability to shape policy and the functioning of the state. While Sen's argument may be contested, what it demonstrates is a deep commitment to looking at problems from a holistic and human-centric perspective. One can contrast this, for instance, with a sophisticated piece of econometric modeling, which finds that higher water pricing is beneficial. At the same time though, it may ignore the many social implications of a higher water price and how it can feed into existing patterns of social exclusion and marginalization.

Main Thematic Strands of *Social Research*

While *Social Research* covers a major range of epistemologies, the text can be seen as organized along two main axes. The early part of the book, up to Chapter 8, traces the origins of European scientific rationalism and the rise of positivism as the preferred mode of inquiry in the social sciences. The balance chapters from eight to twenty seven are devoted to various alternatives to positivism. This greater emphasis given to post-positivist approaches is an indication of the critical attitude towards positivism taken by the text.

Social Research locates the emergence of positivism within the scientific rationalism that pervaded post-enlightenment European society. It also links it to a series of social crises in European society and the urgency that many intellectuals felt in intervening in these crises. At a time when the natural sciences had triumphed as a secular alternative to the domination of theological teaching, *Social Research* suggests that it was perhaps no surprise that the social sciences, which were still in the process of emerging at the time, sought to emulate the success of the natural sciences by following its methodology.

To draw one example from the book, there is substantial discussion of the Durkheimian notion that social facts exist outside human consciousness. Once it has been established that 'facts' can exist outside and independent of the observing human subject they can be considered objective pieces of information. This belief in an objective reality then leads to the possibility of scientifically analyzing society. *Social Research* shows that this was undoubtedly an important moment in the evolution of the social sciences as a field of disciplinary inquiry. The comparative data, for instance, used by Durkheim to study suicide patterns in European societies allowed for generalizable and comparative claims about human behavior that were not possible earlier. But as *Social Research* shows, thinkers such as Max Weber had reservations about this empiricist/positivist orientation and attempted to combine the empirical with a phenomenological approach. By critically locating the emergence of positivism and the debates that surrounded it, *Social Research* de-mystifies the 'objective' scientific aura that tends to accompany positivist research.

Why is the text's critique of positivism and empiricism important? In the Sri Lankan context positivism's social and political consequences are perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in how history, historiography and the discipline of archaeology (which in some ways bridges the social

sciences and hard sciences) have intersected with nationalism. To a great extent both of Sri Lanka's dominant nationalisms – Sinhala and Tamil – have defended their positions using particular versions of history which owe much to a positivistic notion that an objective truth about the past can be retrieved on the basis of 'facts'. At one level academic debates on the history of Sri Lanka and their factual veracity have been central to nationalist claims and on the other an extremely impoverished positivist understanding of history in popular discourse (to which unfortunately historians have also contributed) has played a role in sustaining and enriching narrow and exclusivist nationalist ideas about national belonging.

Through its historicized critique of positivism, *Social Research* performs the valuable task of cautioning would-be social researchers against the pitfalls of attempting to emulate scientific-rationalism in the social sciences. It reminds students of the social sciences that factual veracity and objectivity are difficult and contested terrain. It also reminds us that human existence, either as individuals or collectives, lies at the heart of the critical ventures undertaken in our areas of critical scholarship. In doing so the book urges, implicitly, that social sciences research has to reconcile itself with the partial and contingent nature of the truth claims possible in our fields of disciplinary inquiry – in essence the text reminds social researchers that human-centric research cannot be technicist, narrowly specialized and strive for some kind of non-existent objectivity.

Getting Beyond Positivism

Having discussed the intellectual and political genealogy of positivism *Social Research* devotes much of the remaining space to a detailed and accessible discussion of alternatives to positivism. The text covers areas ranging from hermeneutics and phenomenology to post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches (this is not an exhaustive list). Again the text is deeply historical in its approach – tracing for instance how hermeneutics grew out of the study of religious texts and the attempts to arbitrate between differing interpretations of scripture. The text also discusses at length, complex and contested notions such as subjectivity and philosophical debates about the nature of reality and creatively links them to epistemology and methodology. In each of these non-positivist alternatives the text offers a politically and ideologically rich understanding of how and why these approaches evolved.

Such approaches are now often referred to as 'qualitative' research methods and in the teaching of research methodology a qualitative-quantitative dichotomy is commonly deployed. What is different in *Social Research* is that it gets beyond this facile dichotomy to provide a philosophically challenging introduction to the fundamental difference in how post- or anti-positivist approaches conceive both epistemology and ontology in opposition to positivism. The text clearly demonstrates that there is much more at stake here than a choice on whether or not empirical data, quantification and statistical techniques are to be used. In many ways *Social Research* challenges the false sense of security that numerical data can create in social researchers – especially students who are new to social science research. It seeks to demonstrate that facts and empirical data are not value free or unbiased. For instance, in the discussion on deconstruction the text unpacks how normative views of the world exclude marginal perspectives and how a deconstructive approach can bring these marginal discourses into view and make them legitimate research concerns. In data-driven approaches such marginal perspectives often tend to be ignored as 'statistically insignificant'.

Perhaps one of the weaknesses of *Social Research* is that it does not treat post-positivism with the same degree of critical intensity as positivism. The text does not discuss, for instance, how poststructuralist notions such as discourse can be deployed in ways that replicate the ahistorical and anti-human tendencies of positivist research. There have been occasions when Foucault's notion of discourse has been used in research as almost a metaphysical force that denies human agency. (Turner, 1994) Similarly deconstruction can at times become a form of intellectual sophistry practiced at a high degree of abstraction from the social, political or cultural context in which it is being used. (Said, 1984) However, *Social Research* does, towards the end discuss the possibilities of methodological eclecticism and thereby implicitly question methodological rigidity. The point to be taken away here is probably that simply adopting an anti-positivist epistemology is inadequate. Ultimately the social researcher has to be carefully attuned to the specific nuances of the context within which she/he is operating. Grounded theory, which is introduced towards the end of *Social Research* is one way in which to potentially avoid imposing a rigid epistemological frame on a particular context and instead allow the context to develop the epistemology organically. But again *Social Research* shows that this is not a silver bullet for resolving the complexities and contradictions of social research.

Concluding Remarks

Priced at a modest Rs 1800 for a book of this size, *Social Research* can be considered a unique and ambitious intervention in Social Sciences research in Sri Lanka. Its ultimate goal is to contribute to a robust, politically, culturally and socially invested research culture where informed methodological choices are made. The true potential of the book lies not in attempting to use it as a quick reference guide – though it can be used so – but in having the patience to tease out the nuanced intellectual genealogy it provides for different epistemological approaches. Uyangoda states in the foreword that the book was a decade in the making and perhaps the best appreciation students of social science can offer such a text is to use it with similar patience and attention to the nuanced and detailed arguments it makes.

The book through its very structure and organization also shows that taking sides is not necessarily a bad thing in the social sciences. The clear post-positivist stance taken in the book suggests to the reader that social sciences research has an inescapable political and ideological investment. It cannot be a value neutral endeavor because human activity and human society is never value neutral. It is hoped that *Social Research* will become a widely used reference text in social science research in Sri Lanka and that the ambition of its author in contributing towards a more robust social sciences research culture is fulfilled to some degree in the near future.

About the Author

Jayadeva Uyangoda is an internationally recognized scholar and a recently retired Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Colombo. His publications span a wide range of subjects and he has published a number of books, book chapters and articles in both Sinhala and English on a number of topics ranging from democracy and local governance, political reforms, state reform, social inclusion and exclusion to violence, human rights, ethnic politics and conflict resolution. Recently his scholarly work has been in the area of social research; in addition to *Social Research*, he has also authored *Writing Research Proposals in the Social Sciences and Humanities: A Theoretical and Practical Guide* published by the Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka.

References

- Said, E. (1984). *The world, the text and the critic*. London: Cambridge University press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Democracy as freedom*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G.. (2000). The neo-liberal university. *New Labor Forum*, 6, 73-79
- Turner, T. (1994). Bodies and anti-bodies: Flesh and fetish in contemporary social theory. In T. J. Csordas (eds), *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self* (pp. 27-47). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.