The Social Sciences, Government and Youth

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It is a great honour to deliver the key note address at this Sixth Biennial Conference of the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils. It is also a happy occasion for me personally to see so many of my friends and colleagues in the Asian social science community.

I am particularly happy that we are meeting in Bali, for two reasons: at the personal level, the art and culture of this island have long been a source of inspiration and enrichment to me. But more important, Balinese society and culture have stimulated several social scientists to produce very seminal insights that have permanently enriched both the social sciences and the humanities and enhanced their interpretative capacity.

In these next few days, you will be examining two very important questions: social sciences and government and the meaning to Asia's youth of the rapid social, cultural and economic changes now occurring in this region of the world. While I intend to concentrate largely in my remarks on the first question, I think it is well at the outset to underscore just how very closely interrelated I believe these two topics to be.

By virtually any measure, the youth of Asia face a disquieting and uncertain future – one in which their capacity for creativity and resourcefulness may very well be the hinge on which the future of this region turns. This will require enhancing their ability to assess their situation, its constraints and its opportunities. Their ability to do so will depend, in turn, on their capacity for healthy and responsible social criticism. Here the contribution that social science could make to the younger generations is a great one – in arming them with the necessary tools and confidence to cope with the accelerating pace of change that is bound to be a constant of their daily lives. But to make that contribution, social science will, of necessity, first have to determine its proper interaction with society and government, for it would be to deny its very name to attempt to carry out its work in a vacuum and unheeding of the realities of daily life.

In the vast process of change now underway, everywhere in the world, youth inevitably is at the cutting edge – however much this might be shrouded by the inexperience of youth and their fascination with simple or radical ideas.

Repressive action by governments against the frequently unsettling actions of youth only runs the risk of blunting this edge and stultifying the society's capacity for growth.

One important role for those who teach social science is to turn this youthful enthusiasm into constructive channels without squelching it. To impart to the youth a sense of history, a respect for empirical fact and intellectual rigour, and a solid notion of the needs, the possibilities and the constraints of their own societies, now and in the future.

Social science is expected to serve two major functions, which may be somewhat contradictory: the first is to provide tools for social management - of the economy, of political systems, of international relations. These tools must be developed out of careful observation of the way things work, or the reasons they do not work. The second function of the social scientist is to provide keys to societal self-understanding, based on analysis of the origin and means of change. The first of these of two roles casts the social scientist very much in the role of scientist, with all its rather dangerous analogies with the objective, experimental observer of physical phenomena. Governments sometimes seem to wish to go further, to cast the social scientist virtually in the role of technician, with a bag of tricks which can smooth over wrinkles in the social fabric. The second function, that of providing keys to self-understanding, calls upon the social scientist to be what Robert Bellah calls "public philosophers".

Social scientists, I believe, can make significant contributions at various levels. One is at the level of policy sciences. However, it will no longer do to formulate policy recommendations which remain unimplemented because of the so-called absence of political will. The effectiveness of the policy sciences has actually so far depended on the stability of power relations and specific assumptions about social and cultural environments. But stability of power relations does not generally exist in today's world, nor can we ignore the differing social and cultural settings in which particular policies will have to be implemented. These elements will henceforth have to be included in the purview of policy science.

Social scientists should be able to say something about likely policy outcomes. They can contribute to the formulation of policy options. They are particularly suited to do so by virtue of their being able to make use of wider horizons - either because of their historical knowledge or their comparative knowledge. In this manner, social scientists should be able to contribute to a reduction in the rate of policy errors. Social scientists can also bring out the broader social, cultural and environmental implications of government policies and relate them to other government objectives - such as, for instance, equity, employment or security. In this manner, they could make governments, and the public at large, aware of new structural changes in society, new demographic patterns, new modes of production, and new stages of political consciousness. These and other findings in the policy area will, of course, be of use to governments, oppositions, and non-governmental organizations.

Another contribution social scientists could make is in the area of evaluation, particularly of government policies over the longer-term. Here, of course, the social scientist is being used basically as a technician; in a sense it is a limited role. But even given these limitations, the social scientists need to

stress that there are a number of preconditions before they can play a truly useful evaluation role.

First, they must have adequate access to data and freedom to use them. This will require overcoming much bureaucratic resistance in many instances.

Secondly, in many developing countries in Asia, they will have to develop an adequate data base. In many ways, this paucity of data constitutes the most immediate problem facing the social sciences in this region of the world; it compels the Asian social scientists, in many instances, to devote themselves to 'first generation' problems of their discipline - that is, basic descriptions and the production of base-line data. The collection of data must be an on-going process before the social scientists can play their other roles.

The broader concern of the social scientist in Asia is to help the government realize that the life and the direction of society is something that goes beyond the day-to-day cares of the government. There are deep-rooted and long-term processes of change and discontinuity underway, and these processes cannot be repressed. Static equilibrium theories are incapable of satisfactorily explaining events of this nature - and much more dynamic approaches are needed to begin to understand the politics of instability and its relationship to power, the formation, the typology, the application and the limits to applicability inherent in each type of power.

It may be very useful, in this connection, to be more concerned with factors affecting the resilience of a society rather than with the stability of society. Factors like conflict resolution, solidarity making, community formation and maintenance become even more important in light of the additional eroding impact of modern communications on social cohesiveness.

In this region of the world, most governments have a commitment to development - and, in differing degrees, to development dictated by planning. While there are variations in the approaches and enthusiasms to planning, they all imply the capacity for deliberate policy interventions. This has, in turn, meant the use of social scientists in the planning process - as yet, primarily economists, but increasingly also the other social science disciplines.

One of the problems that has resulted from this for the social scientist has been overexpectation on the part of governments. They are primarily interested in the social sciences only to the extent of the perceived utilitarian value for government policy. Governments expect clear answers to policy questions and clear steps toward implementation of these answers.

This is so because governments tend to perceive development efforts as mainly linear ones: it is a matter of determining where to go, and the social scientists are expected to tell governments and their agencies how to get there.

We now know, however, that a linear development effort from the top down often leads to major errors and proceeds at the expense of the values and well-being of others - the poor, religious and linguistic minorities, and so on. Thus other notions about development have arisen: development from below is one; the notion of planning and development as a process of social learning is another. Nation-building has proved to be a much more complicated challenge than we thought - particularly within the pluralistic societies characteristic of

much of the Third World. It means developing a single polity out of disparate ethnic groups brought together by the vagaries of colonial history. Making the process work tests our abilities at consensus-building, the art of compromise and the habit of constructive criticism - and these all take time to learn. They involve a kind of social learning in which the whole society must participate.

Increasingly we are coming to realize that the key to development is the release of the potential energies and creativity of people at all levels of society. But to energize a society which, like many Third World societies, has over centuries of feudalism and colonialism been passive is an enormous and challenging task. How does one go about stimulating this development from below in a culture where, from generation to generation, the tradition of evasion and passivity has been handed down as the optimal way to respond to outside direction? And when that energy is released, as we have seen in many parts of the world, it can destabilize social equilibria, causing concern to governments which are inclined to see order and stability as a pre-condition for development. Thus the continuing search for alternative development strategies is part of the enduring tension between the social sciences and government - between those who would depoliticize development in the interests of order and stability and those who see development as an often untidy, frequently risky but inevitable and desirable political process.

Part of the role of the social scientist is to explain to governments that these processes of change now underway are much more complex, much more ambiguous, and much more polyvalent than bureaucrats and politicians commonly perceive. Many other actors apart from government or its oppositions are part of these processes. They are often autonomous and beyond control of government and in other cases external. To be able to perform this role, however, social scientists will need to be engaged with far broader concerns than governments would ordinarily desire: with questions of freedom, autonomy, participation, cohesion and social purpose, all of which are vitally important in a rapidly changing society.

We should have no illusions about the magnitude of changes that are now underway. They are very sweeping and very real. They have led to the fragmentation of states and, in some instances, to the collapse of political systems. They have triggered very traumatic experiences in the transfer of power.

What is needed essentially is deeper understanding of the on-going historic processes of change: the nature and scope of structural change now taking place; how structural change becomes interwoven with cultural orientations and traditions; who are the main carriers of such institutional arrangements; what are the processes of interaction and struggle through which these carriers influence events; how the interaction of events and forces on the domestic and international scene now compounds these processes.

The task for the social scientist is to help governments, and society at large, understand that social and political stability is not dependent on government action or policy alone. The family, the community, educational and religious institutions, political processes and institutions, the private sector - and even, in this age of instant communications, the committed individual - are all actors who contribute to or detract from stability.

It is natural for governments to be interested in maintaining law and order so that the process of development can proceed in the most orderly fashion. But in the end, order and justice are the responsibility of the polity as a whole. No government can impose stability by itself - and if it tries to do so, the inevitable result is oppression, violence and bloodshed.

The role of social scientists in nation-building, over and beyond their contribution to the development effort narrowly defined, inevitably brings them face to face with the social and political convulsions through which most societies in Asia have gone, including a high incidence of armed conflict. Indeed, development and security are very closely linked. It is therefore incumbent on the social sciences to provide a much clearer indication of the links between development and security, as well as to evolve concepts of security that reinforce development and, conversely, concepts of development that reinforce security.

Neither can the social sciences escape their responsibility for studying the sources of conflict over national borders, conflicts with or among minority groups, conflicts involving self-determination, conflicts arising from distributive disputes within and among states, and systemic conflicts, which constitute the major patterns of conflict in post-World War II Asia. This concern, in turn, leads the social scientists to the most fundamental problems of society that turn around the issues of freedom, justice and equity. It leads them to concern themselves with human oppression, the nature of the state, social knowledge and social movements, and with interrelationships among all these in a global context of growing vulnerabilities on the one hand, and rising political consciousness on the other.

Many of the changes now underway escape the attention of governments in their preoccupation with the pursuit of short-term development goals, so it is important that these changes be identified independently by social scientists. These are changes that go on irrespective of government designs or policies - such as, for example, population increase, growing citizen sophistication due to the communications revolution and its accompanying rise in political consciousness, the impact of industrialization on culture and society, or the many forces that spill out of rising unemployment. These kinds of rapid social change lead to confusion, to alienation, and, in some instances, to specific religious responses. Such reactions are really not very well understood and need much greater attention from the social sciences, if they want to enhance their predictive capacity.

This could help to improve our appreciation, for instance, of the ways in which the meaning of life is imbedded in religion and language. There is much to be gained here in Asia through improved understanding of indigenous conceptual systems - ranging from formal religious or philosophical creeds to unconscious linguistic structures. These are the basic instruments which define, order and create meaning in individual and social perceptions. To increase our understanding of the workings of Asian societies, social science, which was born in the West, needs to study more closely these essential undergirdings of our indigenous cultures if it wants to be more relevant to their concerns.

The social scientists have tended generally to define religion as something outside of their reality. But religion has deeply etched itself in Asian culture,

and we now see that it has come to the fore as a major political force in Asia and in other parts of the world. To be honest, the social sciences have been caught largely unaware by these sudden swirling currents. Religion, however, offers a good example of how the social sciences should constantly try to relate to the larger issues of social reality and help articulate the intellectual framework for better understanding of different modes of being and living.

This could play a crucial role in keeping a pluralistic society viable and on course at a time when familiar institutions and moral certitudes are beginning to fall by the wayside. It would greatly enhance a society's capacity for conflict resolution. As I noted a moment ago, we are all too familiar here in Asia with how easily conflict can be triggered. We have seen it flare up as a result both of the failure of development and the success of development - either can result in making too painfully clear the gap that separates different groups in our pluralistic societies. This is why it is important to emphasize the need for resilience in our societies rather than stability, for we are dealing here essentially with forces that cannot be repressed, but must somehow be accommodated.

To the extent that social scientists have clear ideas about the future of their countries, the national goals that should be pursued, and the manner in which they can be pursued most effectively, they are inevitably drawn to political power as the means to translate their ideas into reality. But the slowness of social change, the inevitable compromises that go with administrative or executive responsibilities, the need to cater to popular prejudices, the unintended side-effects of policy - all do violence to the clarity of the social scientist's vision. Governments, generally, are concerned with the preservation of the system and the circumstances that brought them to power. New ideas and information very often constitute a threat to the established order. Thus, while political leaders and bureaucrats may be well aware of the crucial contributions that social scientists can make to government, they may also maintain a level of distrust towards the qualities that make for successful social science: academic freedom, independence of thought, critical analysis, normative judgment. While the social scientists see themselves as the custodian of the tradition of free inquiry and intellectual curiosity, the government administrators feel constrained by rules and regulations, have to obey a hierarchical structure of authority, and their options are blocked by decisions already made somewhere above them.

Thus the delving by the social scientist into many of these areas may not always produce research findings that are convenient to governments. This can lead to loss of interest and funding, suspicion or even hostility.

The social scientists must realize therefore the possible costs to pay, and the possible dangers to be avoided, when attempting to serve their government. Social scientists run the risk of losing their autonomy and freedom to select and design their own research topics in doing government contract work. There are pressures for secrecy that must be avoided; as scientists, it is essential that the exchange of scientific information remains free. In secrecy, moreover, there is often no room for criticism or peer review, without which quality and credibility suffer. There is also the temptation of self-censorship in order to provide the buyer with what he wants to hear.

Even by simply presenting objective facts, it should be realized, social scientists can run afoul of vested interests and perceptions. As K. J. Ratnam has pointed out, "Social science can become a radical force without being wedded to radical causes, simply by showing that society is not what it is commonly perceived to be." Like the child who cried "The emperor has no clothes," the social scientist often challenges image with fact. Consider, for example, the revolution in women's consciousness that came about in part because social science research exploded the myth of the nuclear family; social scientists revealed that women in large and increasing numbers were working outside the home, were raising families on their own, were making vital contributions to the economic survival and the welfare of their families, and were being abandoned, mistreated, and discriminated against by the very men charged with their protection.

This then brings out dimensions of the work of the social scientist that goes well beyond service, either to the government of the day or to the opposition. It defines a continuing, enduring role for the social scientist from which governments may benefit to be sure - but, more important, the whole nation may benefit.

Considering the many challenges open to the social scientist in interaction with government in many ways and at many levels, it seems clear to me why the social scientist should take an interest in helping governments to draw up, elucidate and implement policy.

But before the social sciences can expect to play a truly constructive role, however, they need to look inward at their own present weakness. They need, for example, to do something about the fragmentation and divisions that have arisen within their own disciplines. This has, in many cases, led to a disassociation of knowledge from social reality. In third world countries in particular, I think there is urgent need to pay more attention to the broad canvas of human affairs which means greater attention to qualitative judgments and normative issues. The problems under study must be linked more closely with the moral concerns of our times, and less with the selection of areas of research defined by the availability of quantifiable data.

In the accomplishment of this, one important step will be to move beyond present disciplinary boundaries into co-operation with a range of other disciplines, in the natural sciences and the humanities. Indeed, a significant initial move would be closer linkages and dialogue between the social sciences themselves - chiefly across that bridge which seems to separate the economists and non-economists.

It is important also that links between social science and science and technology be forged. There are a host of unexplored issues on the interface between science and technology on the one hand and society on the other, especially in the developing countries. The social sciences will have to address these and bring out the social and ethical implications of technology choice. Many of the most crucial development problems with which we are confronted lie at the intersection between biophysical, social, economic and cultural factors, and we have not developed the concepts that allow us to deal with these problems.

Particularly important, in my view, should be closer links between the social sciences and the humanities. The social sciences took shape originally in the West, in stable, secularized societies which helped to mould many of their concepts and methodologies. It is now becoming clear that it will be necessary for the social sciences to look more deeply into the structure of ideas and perceptions that give meaning and direction to the lives of people in their own culture. Without this, much of social behavior and many social phenomena cannot be adequately explained. Through closer co-operation with the humanities, the social scientists can enhance our understanding of the dynamics of change and the manner in which new factors can be integrated into our value systems. Therefore, when we speak about the so-called indigenization of the social sciences, we mean not only the setting of independent agendas by Asian social scientists. Woven into the indigenization process will have to be greater linkages and cross-fertilization with the humanities. It is only by paying careful attention to such dimensions that we will be able to develop a truly indigenous social science.

Having said this, it should be equally clear that in overcoming the Eurocentrism of so much existing social science we must not become prisoners of our own parochialism. We need to be charting a pathway that will ensure both the indigenization of the social sciences and the continued pursuit of universality - but one rooted in the pluralism of present-day global society.

We need also to study the social transformation of our societies in the context of their interaction with the international system. A concomitant responsibility is to try and understand the ways in which the workings of the international system are influenced by processes of social change within individual societies. It will only be out of the recognition of the pluralistic dynamics of change in the interaction of complex systems that we may be able to manage interdependence in a culturally diverse world.

In all of this, it will be essential to keep in mind the importance of enhancing the general level of competence of our social scientists. There must be greater attention paid to improving the scientific rigour of this discipline in many of our scholarly communities; one important way of enhancing rigour lies in greater openness to peer review and peer criticism. Many of the cultures of Asia are built on the principle of conflict avoidance and there is therefore a reluctance to criticize each other. But if they are to be intellectually respectable, social scientists of Asia must be ready honestly to critique each other's work.

As I have indicated, even the simple presentation of objective, quantitative data can bring the social scientists into conflict with political, economic, and social vested interests. How much more so when the social scientists add to the role of scientific observer the normative roles of critic, and moral philosopher.

There are, of course, many others in our societies who play these latter roles. They include members of the press, the clergy, the literati, the artistic community, and of course political opposition movements and social action groups. What distinguishes social scientists from these others is the academics' grounding in empirical observation, and a professional commitment to and respect for empirical evidence. This means that the dedicated professional social scientists will not permit their own prejudices or preferences to drive out the evidence that their profession has trained them to gather.

To say this is not to demand of the social scientists an Olympian detachment from the subject of their research in the name of scientific objectivity. There has been, in the last several years, a healthy recognition that pure objectivity in the face of human turmoil is a quality that is not attainable or even necessarily desirable. Each of us is the product of our own culture or mix of cultures.

This raises a very large question with which the social sciences will have to wrestle, which turns on changing notions about the value-free character of the social science disciplines, about objectivity and about quantification. More and more, it is coming to be recognized what an illusion it is to think that the observer can be totally detached from the object of observation, thus releasing the social scientist from his social and moral responsibilities. Social science cannot be value-free - the researcher is part of the universe which he or she is researching and the very act of investigation can change the character of that universe.

This general trend has led to concepts of the participant-observer and to differentiation between the inside view and the outside view. It has led to a clearer understanding of the need to work not so much with an ideal conception of objectivity but with the notion of relational objectivity.

Having said this, I might point to something that has begun to break through in the self-perception of the social sciences. This is a double phenomenon that flows not only from acceptance of the inseparability of the observer and the observed, but also from recognition that the very interaction between the observer and the observed could be the source of a new creativity in the social sciences. This has led social scientists, as a matter of conscious choice, to identify with and to commit themselves to various grass-roots movements in their societies. They have come to consider it a professional and personal obligation, in their work, to illuminate such movements and the options that are open to them for further advancement. This has all raised profound questions, still being debated, about objectivity and ideology, about universality and authentic specificity, and about methodological rigour.

These questions, I realize, have particular sensitivities for Third World social scientists. It has been all too easy for them, in the absence of relevant theory, to become deeply radicalized - and, in the process, lose something of their ability to contribute to more comprehensive understanding of the enormous complexities of their societies.

I recognize full well that the lives of Third World social scientists are not easy ones - torn between the tradition of intellectual detachment and objectivity which educated them and the reality of suffering and despair which surrounds them.

Theirs is also a risky calling - squeezed as they are between their professional integrity and moral commitment on the one hand and political pressures on the other. This means that often the greater their commitment to moral commitment and scholarly honesty, the tougher and more agonizing their jobs become. The price they sometimes have to pay is loss of their freedom - or even their lives.

The rewards of the social scientists' profession, however, can be large ones. They can count among their satisfactions their roles in enlarging society's choices - a major contribution in the evolution of their nations. They thus enlarge the space of freedom - without which rational and humane government is not possible.

Certainly not the least of these rewards is the opportunity of holding out to today's troubled and alienated youth some measure of hope - that precious flame in the human soul which can gentle the darkness. Hope always has its elements of irrationality, but it is, at the same time, an expression of the vitality of a society or of an individual. The role that social science can play is to provide youth with the intellectual wherewithal to build a reasoned hope - so that the dreams of our young are not shattered by violence and hatred, but rather fuel the creativities and humaneness of future generations. Being one of the sources of such hope would be a worthy legacy of social science as the world moves into the 21st century.

Thank you very much - and, again, let me say what a great pleasure it is to be here with you today.

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