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A Critical, Social Scientific Approach to the Study of Communication Structures and Processes: Problems and Possibilities

The deliberate, overall orientation of this article is social scientific, so presumably this should mean something. It has been said that there are as many definitions of social science as there are social scientists. But, as a starting point I shall settle for a fairly simple approach - one that encompasses the main characteristics of social science, although obviously this, in itself, represents a selective judgement.

Social science, which is generally regarded as including psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics and political science, consists of the *disciplined* and *systematic* study of society and its institutions, and of how and why people behave as they do, both as individuals and in groups within society. At a minimum it would appear that "scientific" entails a systematic and disciplined method of acquiring knowledge and, what is more, that knowledge must be *verifiable knowledge*.

This presents a problem at the outset. For society, its institutions and social relationships may not be susceptible to scientific study. Consequently, the methods of the natural sciences should not be applied to social phenomena. That the "social" and "scientific" cannot stand easily together was apparently behind the decision of the British Government in the early nineteen eighties when it changed the name of the body (which included mass communication research in its remit) from the Social Science Research Council to the Economic and Social Research Council. If it's social it can't be scientific!! After all, we were informed by, Prime Minister Thatcher, who had much in common with President Reagan, that "there is no such thing as society".

We also need to recognise the humanistic affinity of social science (this is particularly true with regard to communication), and its overlap with philosophy, law, geography and literary criticism. Several perspectives (for example critical, theoretical, empirical and humanistic) may be detected in social science. (1) Consequently, even amongst those who consider themselves social scientists we are likely to find many different approaches to the study of the media and the communication process. Some of these assert that we cannot "objectively" know "the world out 'there", and that objectivity is no more than inter-subjectivity. To them what matters is internal validity, not construct validity or reliability, and internal validity has its foundations in human perception, not rigorous methodology, i.e. mechanistic reaction to manipulative stimuli. (2) Let the researched be the researchers.

These approaches may range from those who strive to be scientific, adopting models or adapting models from the natural sciences, to those on the the other wing who, in studying the same subjects, rely more on imagination and insight, unfettered, as they see it, by scientific paraphernalia. Just to complicate matters, there are also those who attempt to blend the two approaches.

Although my focus is on social science and social scientists, social scientists are not the only scholars with a contribution to make to a debate on communications and the media. This debate has been carried out by literary social philosophers, moralists, artists and educators who, judging from their comments, often feel that the social scientists are so preoccupied with research techniques and methodological devices that their works lack immediate social relevance, and that they suffer further because they are unrelated to the general intellectual discussion of mass culture on the one hand, and its historical development on the other. The social scientists may reply to this by questioning the whole nature of the evidence produced by these writers, and by criticising what they consider to be the undisciplined nature of the generalisations, interpretations and speculations which abound in the field. (3)

This issue has been with us for some considerable time but, in recent years, with the burgeoning of Cultural Studies, it has re-emerged in new forms and taken on an added significance.

Cultural studies covers a multitude of positions and manifests marked differences at many levels. James Carey, an outstanding scholar in this field and a founding father of Cultural Studies, maintains that it does not represent a homogeneous point of view; "It is not a body of propositions or methods commanding universal assent from those who practise scholarship under its banner." (4)

Carey's wing of cultural studies shares with critical social scientists a faith in liberal democracy and in reformist measures to make society more just and open. Together with some schools of social science, it represents a revolt against the extreme scientific approach ("scientism"), and is interested "in charting and explaining social conflict, in uncovering the meanings embedded in social practice (and) in laying out the dimensions and politics of social struggle". Surely this is social science, at least as I interpret it, so whether one should regard Carey and others like him as social scientists is not really relevant - it is the overall approach that matters. Carey is quick to remind us, however, that there are those working in cultural studies who are far removed from his approach. These tend to equate pretentious speculation and interpretation with theory, adopt a selective approach to the use of evidence, and appear to have abandoned, or perhaps have never even embraced or understood, a systematic approach to knowledge. (5)

But far more serious than this, according to Carey, is the failure of these writers to understand history, economics, organisations, power, social relationships and the nature of social reality in the complex contemporary society. In other words, their work reflects an ignorance of the social scientific perspective and an absence of intellectual analysis and political understanding. One of the outcomes of this lack of perspective, intellectual analysis and political programme is a moral and ideological posturing on diversionary issues such as gender and ethnicity. Such obsessions, argues Carey, are no adequate substitute for an analysis and programme which recognises the economic, political and cultural contexts of social struggle. It is interesting that a renowned cultural scholar, such as Carey, draws attention to this problem, particularly in view of the increasing tendency to indiscriminately mix cultural studies and mass communication research.

So, even in our relatively inclusive approach, not everything goes. In searching for guidelines and criteria we could do worse than follow the advice of the sociologist John Rex. (6) Some twenty years ago he emphasised the need for systematic and accurate observation, a respect for evidence, careful examination and description, caution and the consideration of alternatives. He saw these qualities as the sine qua non of social scientific endeavour, and he rejected dogma, doctrinaire assertions, selectivity and the work of those who were either unable or unwilling to make the distinction between ideology and social science, and who often promoted the former in the shape of the latter.

However, it is important to stress that, because validation and disciplined, systematic study are given priority over assertion, this does not imply indifference to values and social concerns, nor should it prevent us from advocating and working towards preferred futures, and having our own specific aims and objectives. We need not accept a value vacuum and the accompanying political and educational paralysis. However, it is essential to recognise that others may have different preferences and objectives. To some it is the commitment, the social concern and the wish to use results to produce change that gives research not only its dynamic quality, but also its justification. As Alvin Gouldner maintained, the critical, moral component is a vital part of an endeavour which is essentially purposive, and in which social scientists might be likened to "clinicians striving to further democratic potentialities". (7) Ideally, the pursuit of theoretical refinement, methodological rigour and social objectives *need not* be incompatible but unfortunately, in practice, they often are.

We also need to draw attention to the limitations of social science. It is important to do this because some social scientists have created false expectations by suggesting that clear answers and successful formulae may be produced at short notice. In doing this they over-simplify by omitting that which does not fit into their neat schema, and this tends to lead to a failure to recognise what really amounts to the intrinsic unpredictability of the field. Social science can be sold short by selling too hard.

When he was Chairman of the Social Science Research Council in Britain, Andrew Scholfield wrote:

"In the social sciences it is rarely possible to pose questions and provide answers in the manner of some of the natural sciences, and it is a refusal to recognise this that has often led us up the wrong path. It is the nature of most of our work that it tends to produce useful ideas and an increasingly firm factual base, rather than clear-cut answers to major policy questions. We must try to tease out the relationships which have a crucial effect on policy and, in doing so, provide not so much widely applicable generalisations as a sound, informed basis for decision-making and, at the same time, cut down the area of reliance on guesswork and prejudice." (8)

If we design and carry out our research with this in mind - in other words, not attempting to do the impossible (establish unilinear, causal relationships), we might make more progress and be seen as more credible.

That research - the questions addressed, the methods used and the facilities and support made available - cannot be adequately explained or understood apart from the culture within which it developed and operates, becomes abundantly clear when we examine the short history of mass communication research. In its early days mass communication research, which at that time (i.e. nineteen fifties) was very much a product of the USA, was heavily influenced by media requirements and commercial considerations. The main aim was to accurately assess how many and what kind of people read, listened, watched, etc. and how they regarded what they consumed. These requirements contributed to an oversimplification of the issues, as also did the application of interpretations of war-time experiences in relation to propaganda and psychological warfare. Social concern about the possible negative influences of the new media, as well as over-optimism and enthusiasm about its cultural and educational potential - the former invariably attracting more attention and funds - also helped to frame the questions that were asked in research.

To summarise, and risking oversimplification, we may say that, on the whole, at that time the research was fragmented, ad hoc, atheoretical and lacking in conceptual refinement. Hypotheses were rarely formulated or tested; the emphasis was on doing rather than on thinking in an administrative and commercial service research effort which

was geared primarily to serving the system, either implicitly or explicitly, rather than questioning it. Reliability prevailed over validity, and method over substance, in what was a narrow, media-centred, decontextualised, simplistic, psychological, individualistic orientation. Concepts such as "social process", "structure", "power", "organisation", "control", "culture", "agenda-setting", "legitimation", "professional socialisation" had not been introduced, or allowed to make the simple causal equations more realistically complex. Rarely were attempts made to study the social meaning of the media in historical or sociological contexts. Moreover, the bulk of the research was unbalanced, tending to concentrate on one aspect of the process (effects and reactions) to the neglect of the factors that influenced what was produced.(9)

It is possible that someone reviewing the situation today might evaluate in terms similar to those just outlined and, up to a point, this might be excused, for a great deal of what today passes for mass communication research still bears many of the aforementioned characteristics. But, to do so would miss something which is present today which was not present thirty years ago. Over the past quarter of a century there have been clearly discernible developments away from the mainstream, conventional, simplistic, service research referred to above, and it is these developments - steps towards asking the right questions - that will be illustrated in what follows.

In mass communication research, as in any other social science, we must remember that no matter how sophisticated the methodology, the research can never be better than the questions that are asked in the first place. So, if the questions are inadequately formulated, the answers obtained from the research are not likely to be valid. Furthermore, if we ask irrelevant questions and then use what might be regarded as sophisticated methods, we may compound the error by giving spurious 'statistical certainty' to the findings. Unfortunately, so much in conventional mass communication research consisted of little more than "statistically definitive statements" about the irrelevant, the inconsequential, the trivial and the purely invalid. This was primarily because there was little theoretical underpinning or conceptual refinement - short-term, useful answers were what was required. Yet, in our work, theory could be - should be - the most practical and

economic thing at our disposal for, amongst other things, it determines the nature of the questions we ask.

But what are the questions we ask or, more to the point, what are the questions we should ask in research if we wish to examine media operations and their implications, and develop an understanding of the complex nature of the communication process?

I set out below the research agenda which I formulated shortly after the establishment of the Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester in 1966.

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1. In what way, to what extent, and over what time period will the new developments in media technology render existing communication technology obsolete?
2. Does the "communication revolution" represent an entirely new factor in the socialisation process and, if so, how?
3. Does the new technology demand an entirely new institutional and organisational structure, or can existing structure be suitably adapted?
4. How should one decide between
 - (a) private interests and public control?
 - (b) public accountability and freedom of speech?
5. Many decisions in media policy are made in the name of "the public good" and "the national interest". But what do these terms really mean, and who decides what is good?
6. Granted existing structures of newsgathering, selection and presentation, it is not inevitable that the "free flow of information" will work to the advantage of those who possess the information and the means to disseminate it?
7. Is it not time that the media were demystified, and that we began to question the restrictions and the possible tyranny of professionalism? Must we always have the few talking about the many to the many?

8. Will the multiplicity of channels made possible by the new technology lead to cultural diversity and better opportunities for minority interests? In any case, who will control the software, the input, or the programmes?
9. Is public monopoly the only real guarantee of diversity?
10. Granted existing systems of ownership and controls and the prevalence of western news values, are the media ever likely to provide the amount and quality of information necessary for people to act intelligently in a participatory democracy?
11. Is there not a grave risk that we shall become paralysed by an overload of information? How much can we tolerate? How much can we understand?
12. Internationally, will the "communication revolution" lead to an increase or a decrease in the gap between the haves and the have-nots?
13. As far as the developing countries are concerned, is not the main, perhaps even the sole, concern - how to use the media in the interests of national identity and development? Never mind objectivity, impartiality, or balance. How can one harness the new technology to national as distinct from sectional objectives?
14. How can we guard against possible homogenising influence of the new technology as traditional cultures may become swamped by the commercial off-loading of cheap alien material?
15. What do we know about the process of media influence?

A decade later I added a few questions to this list in order to deal with the implications of technological developments in communications (nationally and internationally), but the basic principles underpinning the recommended enquiries remained more or less the same.

To construct such a research agenda in the late sixties was very unusual; in fact, it is possible that this was the first

agenda of its kind ever to be published. Amongst other things, it marked a change (although by no means a widely accepted one) from what had been primarily, as previously outlined, an uncritical, administrative approach with a psychological orientation which served the system, to a more critical, sociological stance which sought to challenge basic assumptions, question the accepted ways of doing things, spell out implications in societal terms and, where possible, suggest alternatives.

This approach was holistic and contextualised; it represented an attempt to study the media as social institutions together with other social institutions, and the communication process together with other social processes, all within the wider social system.

The critical thrust was not entirely sociological and there are, of course, sociologists who seem perfectly content to serve the system. However, once a sociological perspective is adopted, and one begins to think and analyse in such terms as "structure", "organisation", "system", "social process", "professional socialisation", "displacement", "power", "control", "dependency", "communication needs" and "legitimation", then we have an entirely different ball game from the one which had a virtual monopoly in the field to that point.*

As we have seen, research of the kind advocated here calls for a study of the total communication process. But the total communication process, including the ownership, control, organisation and operations of media institutions cannot be studied adequately unless the media institutions agree to co-operate. This kind of comprehensive research may require the media institutions or communication industries to provide access and facilities, not to mention financial support. It may also depend on the policies and interests of grant-giving bodies.

Media practitioners and policy-makers, although stating that they welcome research, tend to be selective in their reactions to research results. They prefer researchers to deal with problems that have been identified and defined by the media, and rarely agree to "external" definitions from independent research which suggest that there may be other problems which are more important, both to society and to communication. Why should they welcome research which

might challenge their basic values, or question their well-established professional ways of doing things? It is as well to remember that the two groups (researchers and those who work in the media/communication industries, and policy-makers) may have few, if any, common points of reference.

However, we need to recognise that if cooperation has been lacking on vital issues - and it has - then this need not be entirely the fault of those working in the media and the communication industries. Whilst we may consider that research is essential in order to provide the base for informed policy-making, it would be unwise for researchers to think this view is widely shared, and more shortsighted still to create false expectations by claiming that successful formulae and clear answers can be produced at short notice. As previously emphasised, it does research no good at all if it claims too much, and promises more than it is able to deliver. Researchers might also learn to present their findings in a more comprehensible form.

When we deal with policy research, or policy-oriented research, we must recognise that we are also confronted with other problems about the nature of social science, for it may be that social science should never accept an exclusively therapeutic or problem solving role. If both the aims and instruments of research are controlled, as they could be, how can there be the autonomy and independence of enquiry which some would claim is the *sine qua non* of any truly scientific endeavour? When we make research recommendations, plan strategies of intervention, and seek greater involvement, can we avoid the clash between policy interests on the one hand, and the requirements of social scientific enquiry on the other? Or, more fundamentally, is there an agreement about the basic requirements of social scientific enquiry? Irving Horowitz argued, many years ago, that where policy needs rule the critical effort would be the exception rather than the rule, and deterioration in the quality of social science would be inevitable. Are we sufficiently aware of this danger when we make our proposals? (11)

In fact, Horowitz maintained that the realities of the situation were such that the utility of the social sciences to policy-making bodies depended on the maintenance of some

degree of separation between policy-making and social science. It is important in this connection to make a distinction between policy research and policy-oriented research - the former serving the policy-makers on their terms, the latter addressing the same policy issues (or at least including such issues on the research agenda), but addressing them externally and independently, and with a view, where appropriate, to question and challenge, and propose alternatives with regard to both means and ends.

Relationships between social science and policy differ from country to country, and from time to time. The pattern may vary from complete servitude to genuine critical independence, but there is more than a suspicion that independence and purity are usually inversely related to power, status and influence in decision-making. In this sort of situation there is almost bound to be considerable confusion and uncertainty about the role of social science with regard to policy. Stay outside, valuing independence, and risk being ignored and opposed. Go inside, and serve rather than challenge.

When it comes to research that poses a challenge to the media, the media are in a very strong position to defend their position and mount a counter-attack for, up to a point, they control the debate about themselves. An illustration of this tendency is to be found in the BBC's reaction to what the Corporation apparently perceived as the threat from critical research in Great Britain in the nineteen seventies. A researcher, not from Great Britain, and not known for his critical orientation, was commissioned by the BBC to provide proposals for social research on broadcasting. (12) The proposals were duly produced and were criticised at the time as "putting the clock back". Little, if any, research stemmed directly from these proposals, and perhaps it was never intended that it should, the aim being to preempt by offering an alternative to the critical. (13) Such is the state of social science and social scientists (marked differences, lack of agreement), that policy-makers and media managers rarely experience any difficulty in finding a social scientist to counter what another social scientist has said.

If our main aim, as social scientists, is to contribute to making society a better place to live in, then it must be realised that this can be done by transcending rather than by

accepting political and sociological consensus. We do not have to be over-concerned with the restitution of normative patterns, nor need we fall into the trap of examining the costs of dissensus and ignoring the price we pay for consensus. As mentioned earlier, we may address ourselves to social problems without necessarily identifying ourselves with the values of the establishment. (14) This is policy-oriented research. But, as we have seen, there is usually a price to pay for this.

The agencies, trusts and councils which fund research (we should never forget that research costs money) have their own special interests and priorities and these, not surprisingly, lead to certain types of research being favoured and to certain questions being more likely to be addressed than others. Moreover, on occasion attempts have been made to stifle publications if the research results did not fit the preconceived ideas or needs of the sponsors. Two examples of this are provided in the recently published history of the International Institute of Communication, previously the International Broadcast Institute. (15)

Publishers also have their policies and interests and, in addition, they have commercial considerations to take into account. All of these play an important part, not only in disseminating the results of research, but in conferring status and the seal of approval. In social science the link between status and publication on the one hand, and "quality" and usefulness on the other, is not always self-evident.

But not all the obstacles to asking the right questions are external to the social sciences. So let us conclude by returning to some of the points raised earlier about the nature of social science and the approaches and attitudes of social scientists noting that, in some cases, the internal conditions may be conducive to external opposition.

Let us assume that, as researchers, we are asking to be taken seriously about our work on the role of the media in society, claiming that we have a worthwhile contribution to make. But this might be questioned. How good is our past record? What have we contributed? It might be said that when we are not trivial we are contentious and dogmatic, and that we are rarely relevant. There is plenty of evidence to support this. We have to consider the possibility that, to the non-social scientist we may not present a very convincing

picture. The field is inhabited by scholars from different disciplines, with different values, aims and purposes, who seek to construct reality in their own ways. The complexity of our subject matter, and the embryonic stage of development of our subject, are amongst the factors that make this inevitable; in fact, ideally necessary. Nevertheless, it doesn't help matters when media practitioners and policy-makers know they can find a researcher to attack or defend virtually any position.

That the field of mass communication is multi-disciplinary is one of the main problems, and this is exacerbated by the fact that not only are there difference between the various "disciplines" within the field, but that there are also differences and discontinuities within any given "discipline". There are even those who question whether it is appropriate to use the word "discipline" with regard to *any* of the social sciences. Consensus is not the norm so, if consensus is regarded as a sign of maturity, then social science is far from being mature.

But, at this stage in the development of our field, should consensus be our main concern? It was argued earlier that social science should entail a disciplined and systematic study of society from the standpoints of the contributing disciplines. Fine, but we still seek an appropriate blend. Social reality - real life - is multi-faceted. Although not universally accepted, its adequate study requires various theories and approaches applied together, and no single approach is capable of providing more than the partial picture of social reality permitted by its own narrow perspectives and conceptual limitations. In this sense we should welcome eclecticism, not apologise for it. But, at the same time, we must recognise the implications of these conditions, and be prepared for the reactions of media practitioners and policy-makers to what they see as confusion and uncertainty.

Let us remind ourselves that social science is fundamentally different from the natural and physical sciences, amongst other things because of the differences, discontinuities and lack of consensus already mentioned. There are differences in the natural sciences, but they are not of the type which render constructive dialogue well nigh impossible. Moreover, these differences and conflicts cannot be explained independently of the cultures in which the various models and concepts have been conceived, formulated and applied. This is what leads

to confusion, a lack of certainty and low credibility, but it is no good pretending that things are otherwise. This is the nature of the beasts. (16)

The lack of agreement within the social sciences has implications for research which go far beyond any academic debate. This can be seen by examining the way in which the Social Science Research Council (now the Economic and Social Research Council) in Great Britain dealt with mass communication research over a period of twenty years from the mid-nineteen sixties.

One of the main problems with the SSRC was that there was no special committee within the Council to deal with mass communications - it was not regarded as a proper academic subject. Consequently, a proposal submitted to the Council for funding might be dealt with by the Psychology Committee, the Sociology Committee or the Political Science Committee. In some cases all three committees might have their say. When this happened, agreement was unlikely, and either the research proposals were turned down, or compromises were made. The latter happened with one of the first studies of media and race in Great Britain. (17)

Peer review (i.e. the referring of research proposals and the commenting on and reviewing of publications) is valued in academic circles, but in the circumstances the disciplinary orientation and associations of the referees is crucial. This general principle can also be applied to external examinations, and the awarding of higher degrees. Gatekeepers are important in deciding what is "good" social science, what are the right questions to ask, and the "best" methods to use in attempting to answer the questions. There are many different gatekeepers, with different keys, at different gates, all with their own ideas of the right questions, and who should be let in.

This condition of social science, with what appears to be the inevitable contestability of its theories and methods, becomes even more problematic when we consider geographical and stage-of-development components. Examples from international comparative research show that cultural, regional and national differences profoundly influence the research process at all stages and levels.

We need to expand the points previously made and ask other questions. For example, what are we exporting from the

so-called developed world? How suitable are the exported models for the conditions it is intended they should address? Are political, commercial, cultural and media imperialisms being followed by a research imperialism? What forms of indigenisation (native developments) are required, and to what degree should they be applied? These questions should be asked, both directly in relation to mass communication research, and more widely with regard to the important matter of universality and relativity in the social sciences.

When we examine social science research within the international context, and take into account exports and imports of textbooks, articles and journals; citations, references and footnotes; employment of experts and the funding, planning and execution of research, then it becomes clear that we have yet another example of a dependency situation. This situation tends to be characterised by a one-way flow of values, ideas, models, methods and resources from north to South. It may even be seen more specifically as a flow from the Anglo-Saxon language community to the rest of the world and, perhaps even more specifically still within the aforementioned parameters, as an instance of a one-way traffic system which enabled USA-dominated social science of the conventional nature to penetrate cultures in many parts of the world which were quite different from the culture in the USA. It has been argued that, as the USA emerged as a super-power in social science, like it did in other spheres, even what little input was available from other sources tended to be excluded. What is clear is that what was exported did not serve to increase our understanding of the Third World and its communication requirements, nor did it facilitate development. (18)

This takes us back to the questions already raised about the very nature, potential and universal applicability of social science, no matter how free it may be from the aforementioned conditioning. We have recognised several intrinsic problems, but we must now ask how can we possibly deal with the increasing diversification within communication research which inevitably stems from its extension to cultures outside the cultures within which most of its ideas and tools were conceived, developed and articulated?

The cry for the indigenisation of mass communication research, which is often offered as the answer to this question,

(19) cannot easily be dismissed, but it needs to be treated with reserve in certain areas, particularly in relation to some of the ways in which it has already been applied. We may readily accept the need for emerging nations and regions to determine their own research policies, priorities and strategies, rather than having them externally imposed, as was the case so often in the past. Moreover, the need for home-based institutions, housing native staff capable of carrying out the necessary research in their own countries also appears to be generally acceptable - at least on the surface. This "surface" qualification is made because of the expectation that the situation would improve to the benefits of Third World countries if only the nationals of those countries could be given the opportunity, and the resources, to enable them to carry out the research. But this is far too simplistic, for many of these nationals have been trained as conventional researchers, mostly in the west, and seem unable - perhaps unwilling - to free themselves from the ideological shackles of their educational and professional mentors. In this way they may even exacerbate the situation by giving the "alien import" a national seal of approval.

The essence of this particular problem of indigenisation, particularly as far as international comparative research is concerned, is at the level of language, conceptualisation, models, paradigms, theories and methods, which means that it is central to the more fundamental problems of social science with regard to universalism and relativism and as to whether we should be pursuing consensus (in part or in whole), or accepting the inevitability of dissensus. There is no panacea and there are no easy answers to these questions. In fact, the questionings and explorations are only just beginning, and there will be more to question and explore in the years ahead before we can be sure of asking the right questions in research.

However, we know enough from recent experience to point us in the right direction, and put us on our guard against those who come with new, all-embracing solutions. Having rightly rejected the absolutism of positivism and all its universalistic implications for research, we must be careful not to jump out of the frying pan into the fire. In rejecting a position there is no logical necessity to wholeheartedly adopt its mirror opposite. Yet some do this. The danger in this

unthinking, knee-jerk reaction is that knowledge is reduced to mere perspectivalism - a riot of subjective visions - and a form of anarchy prevails. There are many examples today, inside and outside our particular field, which demonstrate the tyranny of the absolutism of non-absolutism, where anything goes and where systematic, disciplined research is dismissed. Useful research cannot thrive in such conditions which, incidentally, are also conducive to political and education paralysis.

So, in our explorations, we have to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis in the hope of eventually reaching a safe port, although an added difficulty is that, as yet, we haven't quite decided on our destination, or the port we wish to reach. The very nature of social science impinges once more - but choices have to be made and, in the end, we can't dodge the issues of validity or values.

In our research - particularly as far as international research is concerned - we need to start with an acceptance of differences at all levels. But it is quite legitimate - in fact necessary - to proceed from this base and attempt to identify, establish, articulate and combine what, if anything, is common. As Paul Hirst (20) argues, different ways of life may be related by ties of symmetric reciprocity, and we may eventually find common denominators or universals which reflect the nature and needs of every culture and sub-culture. At least this possibility should not be ruled out, but it has to be established in our research, not simply assumed, taken for granted, or dogmatically asserted.

The main message in this presentation is not pessimistic or defeatist. It is realistic, conscious of both the limitations and the potential of a research approach which, if pursued along the lines advocated by Andrew Schonfield and elaborated in what I have said is still, despite the shortcomings, the most effective mode of enquiry at our disposal. There are still many obstacles to overcome, but systematic, disciplined, fruitful studies can be carried out within an eclectic framework, and assessed accordingly. This is not an escape from rigour, but an acceptance of an approach (albeit as yet by no means a fully developed approach) which, with its complementary perspectives and respect for evidence is capable of doing justice to the complex set of relationships, structures and processes which characterise our field of study. It is a necessary prerequisite for asking the right questions.

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- Notes** * The old ball game is still being played most vigorously in some quarters.
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