

The Myth of 'Value-Free' Social Science Or The Value of Political Commitments to Social Science

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

Global Research, April 22, 2015

Theme: [History](#), [Religion](#)

For many decades, mainstream social scientists, mostly conservative, have argued that political commitments and scientific research are incompatible. Against this current of opinion, others, mostly politically engaged social scientists, have argued that scientific research and political commitment are not contradictory.

In this essay I will argue in favor of the latter position by demonstrating that scientific work is embedded in a socio-political universe, which its practitioners can deny but cannot avoid. I will further suggest that the social scientist who is not aware of the social determinants of their work, are likely to fall prey to the least rigorous procedures in their work – the unquestioning of their assumptions, which direct the objectives and consequences of their research.

We will proceed by addressing the relationship between social scientific work and political commitment and examining the political-institutional universe in which social scientific research occurs. We will recall the historical experience of social science research centers and, in particular, the relationship between social science and its financial sponsors as well as the beneficiaries of its work.

We will further pursue the positive advantages, which political commitments provide, especially in questioning previously ignored subject matter and established assumptions.

We will start by raising several basic questions about scientific work in a class society: in particular, how the rules of logical analysis and historical and empirical method are applied to the research objectives established by the ruling elites.

Social Scientific Research and Socio-political Context

Scientific work has its rules of investigation regarding the collection of data, its analytic procedures, the formulation of hypotheses and logic for reaching conclusions. However, the research objective, the subject matter studied, the questions of '*knowledge for what?*' and '*for whom?*' are not inherent in the scientific method. Scientists do not automatically shed their class identity once they begin scientific endeavor. Their class or social identity and ambitions, their professional aspirations and their economic interests all deeply influence what they study and who benefits from their knowledge.

Social scientific methods are the tools used to produce knowledge for particular social and political actors, whether they are incumbent political and economic elites or opposition classes and other non-elite groups.

The Historical Origins of Elite Influenced Social Science

After World War II, wealthy business elites and capitalist governments in the United States and Western Europe established and funded numerous research foundations carefully selecting the functionaries to lead them. They chose intellectuals who shared their perspectives and could be counted on to promote studies and academics compatible with their imperial and class interests. As a result of the interlocking of business and state interests, these foundations and academic research centers published books, articles and journals and held conferences and seminars, which justified US overseas military and economic expansion while ignoring the destructive consequences of these policies on targeted countries and people. Thousands of publications, funded by millions of dollars in research grants, argued that *'the West was a bastion of pluralistic democracy'*, while failing to acknowledge, let alone document, the growth of a world-wide hierarchical imperialist order.

An army of scholars and researchers invented euphemistic language to disguise imperialism. For example, leading social scientists spoke and wrote of *'world leadership'*, a concept implying consensual acceptance based on persuasion, instead of describing the reality of *'imperial dominance'*, which more accurately defines the universal use of force, violence and exploitation of national wealth. The term, *'free markets'*, served to mask the historical tendency toward the concentration and monopolization of financial power. The *'free world'* obfuscated the aggressive and oppressive authoritarian regimes allied with Euro-US powers. Numerous other euphemistic concepts, designed to justify imperial expansion, were elevated to scientific status and considered *'value free'*.

The transformation of social science into an ideological weapon of the ruling class reflected the institutional basis and political commitments of the researchers. The *'benign behavior'* of post-World War 2 US empire-building, became the operating assumption guiding scientific research. Moreover, leading academics became gatekeepers and watchdogs enforcing the new political orthodoxy by claiming that critical research, which spoke for non-elite constituencies, was non-scientific, ideological and politicized. However, academics, who consulted with the Pentagon or were involved in revolving-door relationships with multinational corporations, were exempted from any similar scholarly opprobrium: they were simply viewed as *'consultants'* whose *'normal'* extracurricular activities were divorced from their scientific academic work.

In contrast, scholars whose research was directed at documenting the structure of power and to guiding political action by social movements were condemned as *'biased'*, *'political'* and unsuitable for any academic career.

In other words, academic authorities replicated the social repression of the ruling class in society, within the walls of academia. Their principle ideological weapon was to counterpose *'objectivity'* to *'values'*. More specifically, they would argue that *'true social science'* is *'value free'* even as their published research was largely directed at furthering the power, profits and privileges of the incumbent power holders.

'Objective Academics': the Manufacture of Euphemism and the Rise of Neo-Liberalism

During the last two decades, as the class and national liberation struggles intensified and popular consciousness rose in opposition to neoliberalism, one of the key functions of the academic servants of the dominant classes has been to elaborate concepts and language that cloak the harsh class-anchored realities, which provoke popular resistance.

A number of euphemisms, which were originally elaborated by leading social scientists, have become common currency in the world beyond the ivory tower and have been embraced by the heads of international financial institutions, editorialists, political pundits and beyond.

Twenty-five years ago, the concept '*reform*' referred to *progressive changes*: less inequality, greater social welfare, increased popular participation and more limitations on capitalist exploitation of labor. Since then, contemporary social scientists (especially economists) use the term, '*reform*', to describe *regressive changes*, such as deregulation of capital, especially the privatization of public enterprises, health and educational institutions. In other words, mainstream academics transformed the concept of '*reform*' into a private profitmaking business. '*Reform*' has come to mean the reversal of all the working-class advances won over the previous century of popular struggle. '*Reform*' is promoted by neo-liberal ideologues, preaching the virtues of unregulated capitalism. Their claim that '*efficiency*' requires lowering '*costs*', in fact means the elimination of any regulation over consumer quality, work safety and labor rights.

Their notion of '*efficiency*' fails to recognize that economies, which minimize workplace safety, or lower the quality of consumer goods (especially food) and depress wages, are inefficient from the point of view of maximizing the general welfare of the country. '*Efficiency*' is confined by orthodox economists to the narrow class needs and profit interests of a thin layer of the population. They ignore the historical fact that the original assumption of classical economics was to provide the greatest benefit to the greatest number.

The concept of '*structural adjustment*' is another regressive euphemism, which has circulated widely among mainstream neoliberal social scientists.

For many decades prior to the neo-liberal ascendancy, the concept of '*structural changes*' meant the transformation of property relations in which the strategic heights of the economy were nationalized, income was re-distributed and agrarian reforms were implemented. This '*classical conception of structural change*' was converted by mainstream neoliberals into its polar opposite: the new target of '*structural change*' was public property, the object was to privatize by selling lucrative public enterprises to private conglomerates for the lowest price. Under the new rule of neo-liberal policymakers, '*structural adjustment*' led to cuts in taxing profits of the rich and increases in regressive wage and consumer taxes on workers and the middle class. Under neoliberalism, '*structural adjustments*' involve the *re-concentration of wealth and property*.

The scope and depth of changes, envisioned by neoliberal economists, far exceed a simple '*adjustment*' of the existing welfare state; they involve the large scale, long-term transformation of living standards and working conditions. '*Adjustment*' is another euphemism designed by academics to camouflage the further concentration of plutocratic wealth, property and power.

The concept '*labor flexibility*' has gained acceptance by orthodox social scientists despite its class-anchored bias. The concept's operational meaning is to maximize the power of the capitalist class to set work hours and freely fire workers for any reason, minimizing or eliminating notice and severance. The term '*flexibility*' is another euphemism for unrestrained capitalist control over workers. The corollary is that labor has lost job security

and protection from arbitrary dismissal. The negative connotations are obscured by the social scientist's manipulation of language on behalf of the capitalist class: the operational meaning of '*labor flexibility*' is '*capitalist rigidity*'.

Our fourth example of the class bias of mainstream neoliberal social science is the concept of '*market economy*'. The diffuse meaning of '*market*' fails to specify several essential characteristics: These include the *mode of production* where market transactions take place; the size and scope of the principle actors (buyers and sellers); and the relationships between the producers and consumers, bankers (creditors) and manufacturers (debtors).

'Markets' have always existed under slave, feudal, mercantile and capitalist economies. Moreover, in contemporary states, small scale local farmers' markets, co-operative producers and consumer markets 'co-exist' and are subsumed within national and international markets. The 'actors' vary from small-scale fruit and vegetable growers, fisher folk and artisan markets to markets dominated by multi-billion dollar conglomerates. The relations within markets vary between 'relatively' free, competitive local markets and massive international markets dominated by the ten largest 'monopoly' conglomerates. Today in the United States, international banks and other financial institutions exert vast influence over all large-scale market activity.

By amalgamating all the different and disparate '*markets*' under the generic term '*market economies*', social scientists perform a vital ideological function of obscuring the concentration of power and wealth of oligarchical capitalist institutions and the role that financial institutions play in determining the role of the state in promoting and protecting power.

The Question of Political Commitment and Objectivity Reconsidered

By critically examining a few of the major concepts that guide orthodox social science researchers, we have exposed how their political commitments to the capitalist system and its leading classes inform their objectives and analysis, direct their research and guide their policy recommendations.

Once their political commitments define the research 'problem' to be studied and establish the conceptual framework, they apply 'empirical', historical and mathematical methods to collect and organize the data. They then apply logical procedures to 'reach their conclusions'. On this flawed basis they present their work as 'value-free' social science. The only 'accepted criticism' is confined to those who operate within the conceptual parameters and assumptions of the mainstream academics.

Who Benefits from Social Science Research?

In the 150 years since its 'establishment' in the universities and research centers, the funders and gatekeepers of the profession, including the editors of professional and academic journals, have heavily influenced mainstream social scientists. This has been especially true during 'normal' periods of economic growth, political stability and successful imperialist wars. However, deep economic crisis, prolonged losing wars and social upheavals inevitably make their impact on the world of social science. Fissures and dissent among scientists grow in direct proportion to the 'breakdown' of the established order: The dominant academic paradigm is shown to be out of touch with the everyday life of the academics and as well as the public. Crisis and the accompanying national, class, racial and

gender mass movements present challenges to the dominant academic paradigms. In the beginning, a minority, mostly students and younger scholars form a vanguard of iconoclasts via their critiques, exposing the hidden political biases embedded in the work of leading social scientists.

For example, the critics point out that the pursuit of 'stability', 'prosperity', 'social cohesion' and 'managed change' are ideological goals, dictated by and for the preservation of the dominant classes faced with societal breakdown, widespread immiseration and deepening social changes.

What would begin as a *minority* movement critiquing the '*value free*' claims of the mainstream, becomes a *majority* movement, openly embracing a value informed social science oriented toward furthering the struggle of popular movements. This happens through committed social scientists, whose work criticizes the structures of power, and propose alternative economic institutions and class, national, racial and gender relations.

Economic crisis, imperial defeats and rising social struggles are reflected in a polarization within the academic world: between students and younger academics linked to the mass struggles and the established foundation/state-linked senior faculty.

Having lost ideological hegemony, the elite gatekeepers resort to repression: Denying tenure to critics and suspending or expelling students on the basis of spurious charges that political activism and research directed toward mass struggle are incompatible with scientific work. The emerging academic rebels counter by exposing the elites' hypocrisy – their political activities, commitments and consultancies with corporate and state institutions.

Movements outside academia and critical academics and students within the institutions point to the enormous gap between the elites declared '*defense of "universal values"*' and the narrow elite class, imperial and race interests that they serve and depend upon.

For example, elite academic claims of defending democracy through US intervention, coups and wars are belied by the majoritarian resistance movements in opposition to, as well as the oligarchies and military juntas in support of, the intervention. The elite academics, faced with these empirical and historical facts, resort to several ideological subterfuges to remain 'loyal' to their principles: They can admit the facts but claim they are 'exceptions to the rule' – amounting to temporary and local aberrations. Some academic elites, faced with the contradiction between their embrace of the '*democratic hypothesis*' and the authoritarian- imperialist reality, denounce the '*tyranny of the majority*' and exalt the minority, as the true carriers of '*democratic values*'. In this case '*values*' are superimposed over the quest for economic enrichment and military expansion; '*values*' are converted into disembodied entities, which have no operative meaning, nor can they explain profoundly authoritarian practices.

Finally and most frequently, elite academics, faced with overwhelming facts contrary to their assumptions, refuse to acknowledge the critiques of their critics. They simply avoid public debate by claiming they are not '*political people*' . . . but reserve their right to castigate and punish their adversaries, behind closed doors, via administrative measures. If they can't defeat their critics intellectually or scientifically, they use their enormous administrative powers to fire or censure them, cut their salaries and research budgets and thus.... '*end the debate*'.

With these elite options in mind and given that their power resides in their administrative prerogatives, critical academics, oriented to popular movements, need to engage in coalition building inside and outside of academia. First they must build broad alliances with local and national academic solidarity movements defending freedom of expression and opposing repression; secondly they must engage in research supporting popular movements. Any successful coalition must be inclusive among critical academics, students, university workers and the parents of students capable of paralyzing the university and negotiating with the academic – administrative power elite. Finally, they have to strengthen and build political coalitions with social movements outside of academia, especially with groups with which academic researchers have established working relations. These include neighborhood groups, tenant unions, trade unions, farmers' and ecology movements and community organizations fighting urban evictions, which will ally with academic struggles on the basis of prior working relations and mutual solidarity. When academics only show up to ask for popular support in their time of distress effective social mobilization is unlikely to evolve.

The 'inside and outside' strategy will succeed if it strikes quickly with large-scale support. These alliances can go forward through immediate victories even if they are small scale: small victories build big movements.

Conclusion

Academic freedom to conduct scientific research for and with popular, national, democratic and socialist movements is not merely an academic issue. To deny this research and to expel these academics creates larger political consequences. Rigorous studies can play a major role in aiding movements in arguing, fighting and negotiating in favor of their rights and interests. Likewise, critical academics, whose studies are disconnected from popular practice, end -up publishing inconsequential treatises and narratives. Such social scientists adopt an exotic and obtuse vocabulary, which is accessible only those initiated into an academic cult. The elite tolerates this exotic type of critical academic because they do not pose any threat to the dominant elite's paradigm or administrative power.

For the serious critical academic, in answering the question of '*knowledge for whom?*': they would do well to follow Karl Marx's wise adage, '*The object of philosophy is not only to study the world but to change it.*'

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Prof. James Petras](#), Global Research, 2015

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. James Petras](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants

permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca