High society

Are our social sciences as relevant to government as they might be?

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Taking up a theme raised by Stuart Cunningham in a recent issue of the *AUR* – that the innovations of Australia's humanities, creative arts, and social sciences are not getting the recognition that they deserve from the nation's government – this paper, dealing only with the social sciences, offers a cautionary note. If the social sciences are to hold the serious attention of the government of any modern Western nation, including Australia's, they cannot continue to fall prey to the tendency, displayed by too many of their practitioners, to criticise ceaselessly such government. That is, to employ a style of criticism called here 'unengaged critique'. This style of criticism targets modern Western governments because they are not seeking perfection, because they are seeking only to do the best they can with the resources they have at hand. The paper offers an explanation of the basis of this tendency, an explanation focusing on one of two understandings of 'the social' or 'society' available to the social sciences – the abundant reason-natural morality understanding – and it offers a means of avoiding it, by using the rival to this understanding – the politico-legal understanding.

Introduction

In a recent contribution to AUR, in which he argues that Australia's humanities, creative arts, and social sciences are excluded from the nation's 'innovation system', Stuart Cunningham (2007: passim) offers a number of telling points towards the proposition that researchers, teachers, and students within the disciplines that comprise this grouping have a lot of innovation to offer policy makers and funding bodies. In line with this assessment, Cunningham lobbies hard, in his capacity as President of the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, to have the policy makers and funding bodies recognise the relevance of these disciplines to the activities of modern Western governments, particularly to those of the Australian government.

   More power to his arm, but I worry that at least some of the social sciences for which he speaks are effectively working against this aim, albeit mostly inadvertently. Particularly worrisome is an approach within some social science disciplines to that most basic of objects, 'the social' itself, often under its more common name, 'society'. This approach – certainly the dominant approach in Australian sociology, but not without influence in anthropology, political science, social psychology and socio-legal studies – uses the very notion of the social, or society, as a platform for ceaseless criticisms of modern Western governments. By this approach, modern Western governments, in serving as modern Western states under the rule of law, are always found wanting. They are found wanting because, instead of seeking perfection, as the approach thinks that they should, society being for it a realm of moral perfectibility, they seek only to do the best they can with the resources they have at hand. These social science critics, as Stephen Turner puts it, use 'the politically unattainable best' as 'a stick with which to beat the attainable good' (Turner 1995: 397).

   This is not to say that criticism *per se* is the problem. Australia, like all modern Western states operating under the rule of law, requires a certain style of criticism to maintain its 'social', its society, as a domain of

relatively free and safe interaction. Such a tradition of criticism helps to ensure that this type of state does what it is supposed to do by way of delivering this package of freedom and safety, and does not itself become a threat to the package. The criticism I am dealing with in this paper, however, is not criticism of this sort, it is a far less constructive style of criticism, a sit-on-the-sidelines-and-carp style, sometimes called critique. In this paper I call it 'unengaged critique'. With such a style of criticism influential in Australian social sciences, it is little wonder that the Australian government does not rush to support all the research and teaching represented by the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

I hasten to add that I do not think this is the only impediment to the full participation of the social sciences in the government of modern Western countries. There may be many more. A potentially bigger hurdle, for example, is one that is related to the unengaged critique problem, but possibly more insidious. This is the operation of the naturalist communitarian notion of the social, which sees society not as an achievement but as a gift of nature, a gift delivered in the form of communities, leading to a concern that modern Western governments are not doing enough to strengthen communities, in the face of globalisation, markets, war-mongering, or other such supposed threats. This obstacle certainly stands in the way of a productive exchange between the disciplines mentioned above and the Australian governments, but it also reaches further into mainstream media treatments of society than does the unengaged critique problem. However, as I do not have the room here to deal with it properly, I will simply note its prevalence, recognise it as a variant of the abundant reason-natural morality understanding that is one of the two understandings that I will be focusing on, suggest it as a topic for further research, and move on.

Drawing on some of the research I've been conducting over the past few years (Wickham 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; Wickham and Freemantle 2008), I suggest that two distinct understandings of the social or society operate in the social sciences, at least in the Anglophone countries. Common to both understandings is the 'basic interaction' theme, by which the social is human interaction per se, and even, in some cases, animal interaction. (Cases like chimpanzees are obvious examples, but basically any species of animal that interacts towards the protection and sustenance of their own unit of agglomeration and/or towards

the destruction of other units is reasonably said to be 'social'. I owe this point about animals fitting into this theme to Barry Hindess (personal communication)). In this sense, society is a synonym of sociality, sociability, and even of culture and community. This basic interaction theme is of course widely employed beyond the specialist social sciences, in expressions like, 'He leads an active social life', 'she is socially very skilled', and 'I'm going to join the debating society'. Perhaps in spite its wide usage, it is vital to the specialist social sciences, serving as the basis for their sophisticated descriptions of interactions – their basic spadework, if you will. This is crucial work and by itself, is beyond the criticisms of the social science I am offering here. It is at the heart of what is scientific about the social sciences, following the tradition by which science is the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. When they stick strictly to the basic interaction theme, the social sciences are pointedly neutral towards matters of the government of modern Western states, very much in the way that one of the founding figures of the modern social sciences, Max Weber, said that they should be. Weber famously contended that all those engaged in the social sciences must strive to 'change hats' whenever they shift from social science per se to political commentary or advocacy (see esp. Weber 1949).

Here are two examples of the basic interaction theme at work, drawn from introductory textbooks designed for use in Australian universities, the first for anthropology students, and the second for sociology students:

> Society refers to "a system of interrelationships which connects individuals together" ... Marvin Harris adds to this the idea of a "common habitat" or environment within which members of a society depend on one another for survival and well-being (Hawkins 2006, p. 5, quoting Giddens and quoting Harris).

> "Social" is a word that is rarely discussed in sociology ... For simplicity's sake, let's say the term social refers to the idea of relationships between people (Bessant and Watts 2002, p. xvi).

These are examples of a neutral way of presenting the social as an object of study, with no hint of unengaged critique. But, of course, they are examples only of the definition of the social or society, not descriptions, explanations, or analyses of some or other aspect of society. To remain neutral beyond the definition stage is a notoriously difficult task, almost impossible. Weber suggests that the best we can do is to be ruthlessly

honest with ourselves and to take responsibility for the political position we are advocating or with which we are aligning ourselves. He highlights 'the presence of a rhetorical and political dimension within the research process itself', insisting that positions be argued vigorously (Palonen 2004, p. 279).

In other words, it is all too easy for me to say that the basic interaction theme *by itself* is beyond the criticisms I am posing, because this interaction is found *by itself* only in introductory definitions. It is my contention that in more complex tasks of description, explanation, and analysis, this theme always travels with one minder or the other. By this I mean that it operates with one or the other of the two distinct understandings of the social or society mentioned above. These two understandings are rivals, through and through. As I said earlier, I call one the 'abundant reason-natural morality' understanding. For ease of presentation I often shorten this to 'the reason-morality understanding', but the idea of *abundant* reason and the idea of *natural* morality must always be borne in mind when considering this understanding, for it is the joint propositions that humans have an abundance of reason and are naturally endowed with morality that distinguishes it from its rival, not the reason and the morality *per se*, as we shall see later. I call its rival the 'politico-legal' understanding. In most modern Western countries, not just in Australia, the reason-morality understanding is the more influential, unfortunately. In these places, it is dominant in many social sciences and in many broader debates about society, politics, law, and the state. It is the reason-morality understanding that is the source of the worrisome perfectibility imperative discussed above and therefore the source of the imperative to unengaged critique of the activities of modern Western governments.

The remainder of the paper is divided into two sections. In the first I spell out the ways in which the reason-morality understanding of society goes about its work, paying particular attention to the ways in which it fosters unengaged critique. In the second I spell out the way in which the rival politico-legal understanding goes about its work, highlighting the ways in which it fosters a constructively critical appreciation of the activities of modern Western governments without crossing over into unengaged critique. In the conclusion I will argue that the social sciences in Australia have some useful models available to them to help them shake off the blight of unengaged critique.

A further caveat is necessary. In what follows I will not provide overwhelming amounts of evidence for my claims about the social sciences in Australia, only enough to indicate the character of the problem I am dealing with. As with the provision of more fully developed arguments about the prominence of communitarianism in debates about society, the provision of more evidence about the role of unengaged critique is something for a future research project.

The abundant reason-natural morality understanding of society

The reason-morality understanding has its roots in Plato's and Aristotle's understandings of sociality, particularly through the Platonic premise of *homo-duplex*, whereby humans are seen to have two natures; a lower nature by which they experience the world and a higher nature by which they can rise above their base experience and realise their abundant capacity to reason. This understanding picked up a few Christian edges in its journey from the ancient to the modern world, through the likes of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, but gained most of its current strength through Kant and his various heirs (see esp. Colas 1997).

For this understanding, the social or society is an outcome of our abundant reason-driven quest for the moral perfection which nature sets for us as our goal. For this understanding, the social, alongside culture and community, is an ally of our abundant reason and our natural morality as they struggle to reduce the influence of and/or to control each of politics, law, and the state. In other words, society, alongside culture and community, is concerned with the formation of fully-reasoning, morally-aware individuals and groups, the true building blocks of modern life. On the other hand, for this understanding, politics, law, and the state have no fundamental relationship to reason and morality. The fundamental relationship forged by Aristotle between reason, morality, and politics, for example – the relationship expressed by his term *'koinonia politiké'* or 'political community' – was dropped by this approach in the modern period, no longer trusted, perhaps in the wake of Machiavelli's decoupling of politics from morality.

For this understanding, politics, law, and the state can and do still have nobility, but they do not automatically have it. They have it only if they serve reason and morality, which is what Kant tried to make them

do and what those working in his wake in the social sciences (and there are a lot of them) still try to make them do. For this understanding, this is to say, politics, law, and the state can be useful forces in the promotion of reason and morality, but only if they are strictly servants. They definitely have no place in the coalition of forces that is meant to rule human interactions – reason and morality, as expressed through culture, community, and the social. In line with this, the social is understood as part of the universal stage on which the dramas of politics, law, and the state are played out, the social is the ground of politics, law, and the state.

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I will again use two textbook examples to illustrate my point. In the anthropology textbook used earlier, Hawkins portrays the modern Western state as the product of the social and its fully-reasoning, morally-aware individuals and groups, as an expression of its 'massive community' (Hawkins 2006, pp. 9-10). On this basis, she presents political issues dealt with by modern Western states as if they are issues only of fully-reasoning, morally-aware individuals and groups, as if this has to be the state's prime concern, that is, as if all political issues are automatically social issues, to be solved in the name of reason and morality alone. For example, in her concluding chapter (Hawkins 2006, pp. 209-217), further advancing her dominant theme of globalisation, she insists that states be judged on the extent to which they aid the establishment of global equity and justice and focuses her attention on 'social protests' against states and multi-national corporations, convinced that the social, as the bearer of humans' abundant reason and natural morality is the best way to achieve equity and justice.

In a different sociology textbook to the one used earlier, Holmes, Hughes, and Julian, after instructing their readers that sociology is 'fundamentally' involved in 'examining the nature of inequality in society' (2007, p. 4), draw a distinction between 'sociology as an instrumental discipline', helping the state to manage society, and 'sociology as permanent critique' (2007, pp. 16-17). They make clear throughout their book that they favour the latter option. For example, in their cursory treatment of the idea of the state (2007, pp. 383-387), they claim that, 'The British created the modern nation-state known as Australia by declaring it to be

legally *"terra nullius"*, an empty land' (2007, p. 386), without so much of a nod to the sophisticated historical debates about the common law treatment of such issues at the time of colonisation (see, for example McHugh 2004; Pocock 1992). As well, the authors of this text are determined that sociology should similarly use the social as the basis for critiques of 'Australia's poor record in environmental welfare' (2007, p 469) and of this nation-state's other 'failures' to respond 'appropriately' to issues of 'globalisation', especially immigration, 'McDonaldisation', and urban sprawl (2007, pp. 473-488).

Neither book displays any awareness of the possibility that states might not have humans' abundant reason, natural morality, equity, and justice at the top of their list of priorities, which brings us nicely to the politico-legal understanding of the social.

The politico-legal understanding of the social

The rival politico-legal understanding has its roots in the much harsher 'man is a dangerous animal in need of great discipline' Epicurean and Stoic understandings of sociality/sociability (see esp. Hunter 2001, pp. 171-172). Human beings, by this picture, have some reason – enough to allow them to see that they need strong rule, that they cannot trust themselves to rule by reason alone – but their will far outweighs their reasoning capacity.

The politico-legal understanding, on its journey to the modern world, picked up a few Christian edges of its own, as well as a few Judaic, neo-Epicurean and neo-Stoic edges, but gained most of its direction through the work of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes in England, and Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius in Germany, as well as earlier thinkers like Machiavelli in Italy and Hugo Grotius and Justus Lipsius in the Netherlands (see esp. Grotius 1925; Hobbes 1994; Hunter 2001; 2003, 2004a; 2004b; 2005; Lipsius 2005; Machiavelli 1961; Pufendorf 2003; Thomasius 2007).

For this understanding, the social is an achievement of politics, in concert with law and the state. Hobbes captures something of the flavour of this thinking in a remark that he offers in *Leviathan* in leading up to

his famous claim that in the state of nature 'the life of man' would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short': 'In such condition [the state of nature], there is no ... industry; ... no knowledge of the face of the earth; ... no arts; no letters; no society' (Hobbes 1994, p. 76 [Part I, Ch. XIII: Para. 9]). In other words, the social is something that we cannot take for granted, something that requires enormous political and legal effort, and, in this sense, something that can be lost.

For this understanding, society did not emerge until politics, in league with law and the state, was able to contain the power of morality, culture, community, and religion (the times and places where this has happened will be discussed shortly). For this understanding, morality is not natural at all but is a series of conventions, conventions which are not always conducive to the rule of these individuals and groups but which can be made so by bringing culture – for this understanding, the formation of strongly wilful and only partially-reasoning individuals and groups – under control, such that new, more restrained persons are formed, as new moral personae (see esp. Saunders 1997; 2002). For this understanding, community is the agglomeration of the individuals and groups around different moral goals (and therefore always potentially dangerous to those who would seek to rule them). For this understanding, religion, if it is not contained as a private form of spirituality, is a special, particularly powerful form of morality, culture, and community, and so considered especially dangerous. And the social or society itself, for this understanding, is, as we saw above, a domain for relatively peaceful, relatively safe interaction between individuals and groups, a fragile domain achieved only by a particular combination of politics and law – the combination that produced the state as sovereign. This still leaves me to explain this understanding's treatment of each of politics, law, and the state.

For the politico-legal understanding of society, politics is the most powerful of all forces. At its core politics is that set of relations which Carl Schmitt described in his famous essay, *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 1976): friend-enemy relations, with no universal or timeless basis for determining either friend or enemy, but instead with constant shifting between the two and with an imperative that friends try to kill off enemies and vice-versa, an imperative that is more often than not displaced, into discussion, diplomacy, treaties, etc., but always potentially active. This is politics at its most raw and, in many senses, its most powerful. While sov-

ereignty politics, with its panoply of offices and duties and its massive machinery, can be thought of as much more sophisticated than raw politics, it cannot be said to be more powerful. For raw politics is politics driven by the will, and without the will, all the offices, duties, and machinery in the world are useless. Of course these two – raw politics and sovereignty politics – do not exhaust the possibilities.

For example, one can think of relatively polite electoral politics and, more interestingly, a politics somewhere in between raw politics and sovereignty politics. In a recent article, Grahame Thompson has referred to such a politics as a politics of 'spirited martial power'. By this, reflecting on recent world events as much as on history, he has in mind a politics concerned with the celebration of 'valour, endurance and suffering', a politics that seeks to invoke 'heroic effort above all else, the achievement of glory and the formation of a warrior culture' (Thompson 2007, p. 493). I think this is a fascinating possibility, though I would not so much separate it out as make sure that it is included in sovereignty politics. For me, the sort of politics Thompson alludes to entered sovereignty politics from the start, possibly on the back of Machiavelli's influence. In pointedly rejecting the humanist assumptions of Cicero and Seneca and building in a much more muscular understanding of *virtú*, with its recognition of the importance for effective political actors as such warrior traits as a measured amount of cruelty, Machiavelli was, in his own way, insisting that a politics of 'spirited martial power' be included in the political armoury of those who would lead the Western world into its system of sovereignty politics. For this understanding, then, politics has no particular nobility attached to it, but considerable respect, or at least awe, because of its raw power, because of the 'spirited martial power' it contains, and, of course, because of aforementioned size and reach of the machinery of sovereignty.

For the politico-legal understanding, law is defined as both a servant of politics – it helps politics to rule – and as a check upon the excesses of its rule. This can be thought of as a delicate historical equilibrium, an equilibrium by which neither politics nor law trusts the other yet both gain strength from the other (with the proviso that, as Schmitt rightly insists, in exceptional circumstances politics always trumps law). This equilibrium can operate under monarchs, military figures, etc., but it gained and maintains its importance as the equilibrium that produced the state-under-the-

rule-of-law. For this understanding, this type of state is defined both by its potential to achieve goals like individual liberty and security and by the underlying fact that it gave the power of politics under sovereignty a massive boost over raw politics. This allows it to reach further than raw politics ever had, both in its capacity to control its target population – that within the territory it rules – and in its capacity to use that control for external purposes – whereby sovereign forces, whether states or non-states, turn their political energies outward, towards the populations of other territories, thereby allowing more space for the rule of internal populations by ever more peaceful means, including discussion, civil law, etc.

In this way, for this understanding, the state quickly became a force in the crucial equilibrium in its own right. This is to say that the state was the product of the tense relationship between politics and law, a product that was soon able to interact with both of them (politics and law) and even to seek to control them (as noted, in exceptional circumstances, states can claim to control law totally, but those same circumstances mean that even states themselves are trumped by politics). Once the equilibrium between politics, law, and state, was achieved – initially, in the seventeenth century, in only a handful of countries (England, Germany, France, and the Netherlands), then spreading, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, to other European countries, to the USA, to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and arguably, to a number of Asian countries and to one or two African countries – the social or society was able to come into its own, to effectively become a force itself in the equilibrium, albeit a weaker fourth force.

From all this, I am suggesting, there is a straightforward lesson for those working in the social sciences in Australia. Social scientific work that employs the politico-legal understanding of the social, possibly in tandem with the basic interaction theme, is likely to be of much more interest to modern Western governments, including the Australian government, than is work that employs the reason-morality understanding. This is not to say, of course, that modern Western governments will use only work that is not critical of what they do. It is, rather, to say that they will use work that realises that society is a domain that they – these governments, as governments operating within states under the rule of law – are seeking to protect and maintain, as a domain of liberty and security. It is to say that these governments will use work that appreciates how difficult the birth of this domain was and how difficult it is to maintain against threats from those who seek perfection based on some religious ideal or other. It is to say that these governments will use work that criticises them from within the bounds of this realisation and this appreciation. While they will of course know that social scientific work produced using the reason-morality understanding of the social is not directly threatening in the way that the aforementioned seekers of perfection based on some religious ideal or other are threatening, they will nevertheless reject such work, as all it does is to mount criticisms that seek perfection of a different sort, a secular perfection based on human reason, a perfection that is not in fact as far from the religious forms of criticism as its advocates would like to believe.

Perhaps I should have said that this lesson should be straightforward. It is not, in truth, as straightforward as the above formulation makes out. This is because the politico-legal understanding of the social operates under a bizarre handicap within the social sciences. While the social owes its status as a force in the equilibrium discussed above entirely to politics, law, and the state, the equilibrium proved so successful in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, in those countries where it took hold, that in fostering greater liberty and security it actually created the conditions that made it appear to many that the social was in fact not dependent on politics, law, and the state at all, that the social was, rather, the stage on which politics, law, and the state operated. This situation has had the paradoxical consequence of strengthening the hand of the reason-morality understanding, which has, as we saw, argued all along that the social is above politics, law, and the state. This makes the problem I am highlighting all the more difficult to confront, but a solution is not beyond current best practice.

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Conclusion: Cause for optimism

A solution is at hand mainly because none of the social sciences in this country are completely under the sway of the reason-morality understanding, including sociology, which is the discipline most affected by it. In disciplines like political science, economics, social psychology, and legal studies, most of the teaching and the research regards the task the Australian government faces in managing, maintaining, and protecting the social with appropriate seriousness.

So, when political science and legal studies, for example, use vague formulations like, 'An evaluation of the process of social change is important to an evaluation of recent social movement action in Australia' (Vromen and Gelbar 2005, p. 348), or 'the legal system [is] a complex social phenomenon rather than simply ... a set of legal rules' (Bottomley and Bronitt 2005, p. 6), it is safe to assume that they are not seeking to undermine the managing-the-social role of governments operating within the state under the rule of law in the way that unengaged critique seeks to undermine it. When practitioners of these disciplines do turn their hand to critique it is as easy to spot as I showed it to be in my anthropology and sociology examples in the first section, and just as easy for governments to ignore. Turning to directly confront sociology, even this discipline has a tradition, albeit well-hidden, in which the social is clearly the product of the political, a tradition that respects the work of governments operating within states under the rule of law, a tradition that regularly criticises such governments but never turns its criticisms into irresponsible unengaged critique, a tradition featuring not only Weber's writings on the politics of governing the social (see esp. Weber 1994), but also those of some early American sociologists like Franklin Giddings and Charles Elwood (see esp. Turner 1994; 2005; 2007; Turner and Turner 1990, esp. pp. 85-132; see also Ellwood 1915; Giddings 1905), those of Raymond Aron (see esp. Aron 1988), Edward Shils (see esp. Shils 1997), and, more recently, Stephen Turner (see esp. Turner 2003).

In other words, while the problem of an over-reliance on the abundant reason-natural morality understanding of society, leading to an over-production of 'sit on the sidelines and carp' unengaged critiques of the activities of modern Western governments, especially those of the Australian government, is a pressing problem, it is nonetheless possible to be optimistic about the situation. What is required is simply a greater resolve on the part of the social science disciplines themselves. They need to resolve to turn away from the production of these all-to-easy unengaged critiques and towards the sort of responsible criticisms, descriptions, and assessments that actually assist modern Western governments, the sort of outcomes that require the use of the politico-legal understanding of society, an understanding that is already well and truly available. For a lead, the affected disciplines could do worse than to consider the way an interdisciplinary research unit that goes by the acronym NATSEM deals with the S in its name. NATSEM – the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling – treats the social entirely as a domain managed, maintained, and protected by the Australian government, and attempts to determine how that management, maintenance, and protection might be enhanced to better deliver the fullest possible package of liberty and security, including economic security and health security (see esp. Baekgaard 1998; Marks, Headey, and Wooden 2005).

In other words, this type of management, maintenance, and protection of society is the best means of satisfying what are sometimes called 'the role and needs of society', for society has no role and no needs beyond those required to deliver the sort of liberty and security that most people in the West have come to regard as the norm. That is surely enough for it to be going on with.

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Acknowledgements

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