

Social Science: A Constructivist Account¹

Abstract: What sort of inquiry is social science? This question used to preoccupy philosophers but fell off their agenda due to a stalemate between so-called naturalists, who took the ideal to be natural science, and exceptionalists, who allied social sciences with humanities. I show that both positions commit the error of contrastivism, namely defining social science in contrast to these two traditions, which inevitably ends up caricaturing them. Using recent advances in philosophy, I formulate constructivism about social sciences, a view that denies an essence to this inquiry and grounds it in the needs of communities to understand and improve themselves.

1. Reviving the question

What sort of inquiry is social science? There was a time when this question genuinely preoccupied philosophers. In the mid-twentieth century Charles Taylor, Peter Winch, David Papineau, to name but a few, spilled much ink on it. Their books and articles on this topic staked out positions on the nature of social science and were discussed vigorously. Towards the end of the last century this changed and by the time I was a student in the early 2000s my teachers told me that this question was dead or marginal, at best outside the 'core' of philosophy, at worst exhausted. My teachers were right, that debate died, as we shall see, for good reasons. But that does not mean that the central question no longer matters. Whether 'social science' refers to a distinctive inquiry with its own subject matter or method, on the one hand, or whether it is merely a conventional term for the knowledge produced in university departments with the right name, on the other, is a live question. Moreover, it is a philosophical question and enough changed in philosophy in the last fifty years to restate and answer it anew, which is my ambition here.

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In posing this question I use the term 'social science' in a maximally inclusive but nevertheless familiar sense to contemporary practitioners and consumers of economics, sociology, anthropology, political and area studies and related fields. When we ask what sort of inquiry social science is, we are asking for a substantive account of its scope and a general sense of the nature of knowledge it can achieve.

Such accounts have been offered regularly ever since the term 'social science' was first coined in the eighteenth century and they still appear to this day.² As expected given this long history, these accounts differ and sometimes dramatically. One venerable tradition since Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill insists that social science shares its basic philosophy with natural sciences, at least once we make adjustments to accommodate the subject matter of people and their societies. An equally venerable tradition starting with Vico and Herder emphasises the distinctiveness of this subject matter from physics, chemistry, and biology and its continuity with humanities. Typically the first tradition bears the name 'naturalist'. The second tradition could be called 'humanist' but I favour the term 'exceptionalist' because its proponents frame social inquiry as deviating from the rules that govern the study of nature.

As different as they are, these two traditions share a strategy: they position social science *with respect to* either natural sciences or humanities and then, depending on this initial choice, they proceed to formulate what social scientists should do and how. I shall call this strategy *contrastivism* to bring out the fact that it begins with a contrast between social science and other epistemic activities against which social science should be defined.

² For the first explicit definition of 'science sociale' see Sonenscher 2009. For a modern attempt to define social science see British Academy and Campaign for Social Science "What Is Social Science?" (<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-social-science/>, <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/about-us/social-sciences/>).

Over the last two hundred years, contrastivism enabled both naturalists and exceptionalists to uncover important and valuable features of social knowledge. Naturalists showed how social scientists can make explanatory generalisations and infer causal relations, despite the complexity of social phenomena. Exceptionalists brought out the importance of empathetic engagement, as well as the mutual shaping of scientific classifications and social life. But neither naturalism nor exceptionalism won the day in any obvious sense. The debate died down and, significantly for me, moved outside professional philosophy.³

While in the twentieth century notable exceptionalist and naturalist arguments came from leading philosophers working in and around the analytic tradition⁴, this has now changed. Modern versions of naturalism and exceptionalism appear for the most part in manifestos of working social scientists and their textbooks and sometimes take the form of a confrontation between the cultures of qualitative and quantitative methods.⁵ In this paper my goal is to show that enough has changed in philosophy to formulate this question anew. There are new untapped resources for making progress and the key is abandoning contrastivism. Instead of positioning social science relative to the supposedly clear categories of natural sciences or humanities, I propose an account of social science as a constructed kind.

Constructivism about any X begins with a recognition that X does not refer to a phenomenon or a property already out there in the world. Human purposes, interests, and judgments are needed to fix X's reference. Recently constructivism made an appearance in social metaphysics to buttress an argument that ethical and political priorities can ground social kinds, such as race and gender.⁶ Such attitudes should come easily to

³ This is not to say that this debate has been inconsequential as it has coloured the contemporary accounts of social scientific explanation and understanding (Risjord 2022, Turner and Risjord 2007 among many others).

⁴ I have in mind writings by Winch 1958, Taylor 1971, Papineau 1978.

⁵ Examples are many so I limit my references to Bevir and Blakeley 2018, King et al 1994.

⁶ Again references abound but for present purposes I limit myself to Haslanger 2000.

social scientists who are used to emphasising the constructed nature of the social world. So it is surprising that constructivism has not been applied to the category of social science itself. I develop a version of constructivism according to which social science is any mode of inquiry that serves the priorities of the community that undertakes to understand and to improve itself. On this view, there are no intrinsic features of social science independent of these goals. Moreover, the methodological proposals of naturalists and exceptionalists can be incorporated into the constructivist account without inheriting the downsides of the contrastivist status quo.

To make this argument I first show in Sections 3 and 4 that the two contrastivist approaches, naturalism and exceptionalism, though they have virtues, do not succeed as informative and action-guiding accounts of social science. This is because contrastivism takes its cue from grand philosophical disagreements rather than from the realities of social sciences (Section 5). Section 6 then sketches a constructivist stance using recent work in social epistemology and political theory on the relation between knowledge making and social priorities.

2 The Contrastivist strategy

Contrastivism, as I define it, is a strategy for capturing the nature of social science by contrasting it either to natural sciences or to humanities. The general formula is as follows:

Contrastivism: Social science is an inquiry with features F, that are appropriate because social science is relevantly similar/dissimilar to natural sciences/humanities which also have features F.

To my knowledge nobody endorses contrastivism as stated above but it is a recognizable and an understandable strategy. In western thought social sciences have always been squeezed between natural sciences and humanities (Smith 1997). Historically 'social science' as a distinct category comes into existence at the end of the eighteenth century against the backdrop of two existing powerful exemplars: Newtonian mechanics, which acts as a model for rigorous inquiry into nature, and literary scholarship into language and

history. The 'two cultures' way of thinking about knowledge gets articulated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and retains its power to the present day (Lepenies 1988). Given this heritage, the idea of defining one endeavour by reference to these powerful neighbouring endeavours comes naturally.

This history explains why we can use contrastivism as a template to articulate two positions that are far more familiar, namely, naturalism and exceptionalism:

Naturalism: Social science is an inquiry with features F, that are appropriate because social science is relevantly similar to natural sciences and dissimilar to humanities.

Exceptionalism: Social science is an inquiry with feature F, that are appropriate because social science is relevantly dissimilar to natural sciences and similar to humanities.

These formulations are schematic but within the spirit of the views defended historically. Naturalism was endorsed by Condorcet, Comte, John Stuart Mill, Quetelet, Jevons, Spencer, Hempel, Papineau, Kincaid, modern sociobiologists and many more. Each of their versions is different, because the proponents typically differ about what they take to be the essential features of natural science.⁷ Thus for Quetelet the key was finding stable statistical regularities about 'l'homme moyen', whereas JS Mill rejected the inductive method in favour of deduction of social phenomena from fundamental laws discoverable by introspection. The only thing in common was that they both helped themselves to the

⁷ Given the long history of the debate my referencing is inevitably limited. Early naturalist and exceptionalist ideas of Condorcet, Comte, the Mills, Vico, Herder, Dilthey, and Windelband are covered in Smith 1997. The more modern versions appear in Collinwood 1946, Geertz 1973, Searle 1995, Hacking 1995, Papineau 1978, Bevir and Blakeley 2018, Stueber 2012, Grimm 2016, Winch 1958, Mink 1966 to name only few.

language of 'natural science', which is what my formulation captures.

Like naturalism, exceptionalism is an umbrella term for many different stances held together by a rhetoric of rejection of natural science as a model for social inquiry. Such rhetoric was endorsed by Vico, Herder, Dilthey, Windelband, Collingwood, Weber, Hayek, Horkheimer, Winch, Taylor, Geertz, Giddens, and more recently Bevir and Blakeley, Stueber, Mink, and Grimm. Again, the views that fall under this umbrella can be dramatically different because there are many ways of departing from the contrasting kind 'natural science'. For the followers of Vico and Herder, the essential characteristic of the social world is its historicity, which they take to be distinctive from the universalising ambitions of natural sciences. For Hayek, the key distinguishing feature of social phenomena is subjectivity (that is the beliefs and desires of agents interacting in a complex world), which he takes to invalidate the dream of social laws. The Frankfurt school distinguished social theory for its emancipatory role and similarly rejected the search for laws. The mid-century followers of Wittgenstein and Austin such as Winch, Geertz, and Searle took language to play a creative function in social ontology, making causal explanation the wrong goal for social phenomena. Contemporary exceptionalists typically combine these threads: for example, political scientists Bevir and Blakeley advocate 'anti-naturalism' which they take to encompass most of the key ideas above.

My view is that both naturalism and exceptionalism fail precisely because they are contrastivist. I mount this argument with full appreciation of how sweeping it must come across. How could you do justice to the two centuries' worth of naturalisms and exceptionalisms in one paper? But this schematic approach is worth trialling. The level of generality I adopt exposes the poverty of contrastivism. My approach is to identify those features F that the proponents of different kinds of contrastivism ascribe to social sciences and the relevant senses of similarity they use to formulate these features. Once these are in place we will see that both naturalism and exceptionalism distort the endeavours to which they contrast social science. The wages of contrastivism is caricature.

3. Against naturalism

The idea that social sciences should be like natural sciences can be spelled out in two ways: by saying that social sciences should imitate the *way* natural sciences operate or that it should aim to imitate its *products*. Let me capture this by distinguishing between *method naturalism* and *outcome naturalism*. Method naturalism attributes to natural sciences a method and recommends that social sciences adopt it too, whereas outcome naturalism attributes the final product, such as theories, or laws, or some other knowledge claims, without tying social science to any particular method. More formally:

Method naturalism: social science is an inquiry with a method M, that is appropriate because natural science also uses M.

Outcome naturalism: social science is an inquiry which produces knowledge claims C, that are appropriate because natural sciences also produce C.

When John Stuart Mill recommends that “The backward state of the Moral sciences can only be remedied by applying to them the methods of Physical Science, duly extended and generalized” (Mill 1856, xii), he is endorsing method naturalism. When, on the other hand, naturalists emphasise the ability of social sciences to discover general laws or law-like *ceteris paribus* generalisations, their view is closest to outcome naturalism.⁸ This is because they place no constraints in how these laws are to be discovered, just so long as they are discovered.

Neither method naturalism, nor outcome naturalism are sustainable. ‘Natural science’ is a capacious category and disciplines within it can have dramatically different methods. If there is one thing philosophers of science learned in the past century, it is the implausibility of the demarcation of science by any particular method, be it falsificationism or randomised controlled trials (Cartwright et al 2022). None of these methods

⁸ Outcome naturalism is characteristic of Papineau 1978, Kincaid 1990. They are also themes in Durkheim and Hempel 1942.

characterize all of the natural sciences and hence method naturalism has no method to be grounded in. In response, the method naturalist can retreat to a more general formulation of 'the scientific method' or even 'scientific virtues'. She could formulate her position in terms of a responsible attitude to empirical evidence and a commitment to improving explanations of social phenomena beyond common sense.⁹ But once naturalism becomes such a general stance, it loses its informativeness. Exceptionalists, for instance those committed to interpretation as a goal of social science, can also adopt such responsible attitudes and commitments. Grounding ethnographic accounts in evidence from the field is, after all, the central professional norm of anthropology. Naturalism thus loses its action-guiding oomph.

What about outcome naturalism? Outcome naturalism focuses on the final product, staying silent on the specific method used to achieve it. Here again, there is a parallel dilemma: Articulate this product too specifically, for example, that science must produce universal laws or general causal mechanisms, and you paint an implausibly uniform picture of natural science. Astronomy, earth sciences, and medicine sometimes study one-off phenomena such as cosmic collisions, earthquakes, rare diseases, pandemics. Their work provides explanation and understanding of these phenomena, but often without generalisability. In response, the outcome naturalist may be tempted to state their view more generally, for example, science must produce systematic understanding that improves on common sense. But this move waters down the view beyond usefulness, because anti-naturalists, and arguably any scholarly pursuit, also endorse such guiding ideals.

My criticisms do not undermine elements of naturalism – commitments to severe testing, causal inference, systematic theorising, are all valuable and important in many projects of social science. Rather, I find naturalism uninformative as an answer to the question what is social science. It is either too restrictive or does not give enough guidance of what social scientists should aim at and how. The underlying failure is the assumption that the

⁹ Steel 2010 discusses this brand of naturalism.

category 'natural science' carries with it enough stable and non-contentious meaning. Ironically, the naturalism's rival exceptionalism fails for very similar reasons.

4. Against exceptionalism

Showing that exceptionalism falls into the traps of contrastivism is harder because there are many more kinds of rationales for this view. I tackle this challenge by identifying four recurring themes in exceptionalists of different stripes:

- *Reactivity*: prediction or stable classification is either impossible or the wrong ideal because people theorise about society themselves and hence change their behaviour depending on the ways in which they are described (Hayek 1942, Hacking 1995, MacIntyre 1981, Giddens 1991).
- *Interpretation*: reconstruction through empathetic engagement and, if possible, a sustained and respectful conversation, and not causal explanation or subsumption under laws, is the key to understanding of social practices (Dilthey and Weber as cited in Smith 1997, Collingwood 1946, Winch 1958, Geertz 1973, Stueber 2012).
- *Historicity*: historical and cultural variation of human practices as well as the primacy of narrative self-conception necessitates ideographic rather than nomothetic modes of explanation with a focus on the specific rather than the general (Vico and Windelband as cited in Smith 1997, Mink 1966, Grimm 2016).
- *Critique*: social science has a unique connection to ethics and politics. Rather than merely describe and explain, it either legitimizes existing power arrangements (Foucault) or else it is emancipatory because it defamiliarizes us from social arrangements that seem natural and normal (critical theory as in Horkheimer 1972, Geuss 1981, Bourdieu 1990, feminist thought).¹⁰

¹⁰ Critical theorists do not typically undertake to distinguish social science from other inquiries. I mention them because they sometimes imply natural science as a contrast and because their views are often co-opted by modern anti-naturalists (Bevir and Blakeley 2018).

Each of reactivity, interpretation, historicity, and critique are important insights. If we read this list as identifying challenges that typically arise in social research or desiderata for some projects in this endeavour, it is hard to argue with these eminently reasonable ideas. Exceptionalists are at their strongest when they describe methodological realities faced by social scientists and when they articulate ways in which social scientists invent and justify ways of knowing that may be unfamiliar to other dominant scientific cultures. The invention of statistics, ethnography, and case studies are all examples of creativity born of frustration with the methods used at the time to study the natural world and the exceptionalist ethos has often driven this creativity.¹¹

Where exceptionalists fail is in the attribution of this list or some portion of it to *all and only* social sciences and in the inference that, therefore, social sciences are special as compared to fields that study the world without meanings, intentions, peculiarities, histories, contingencies, and values. There is no such world. As soon as exceptionalists represent any of the features above as distinctive to all and only social sciences there is present danger of caricaturing natural sciences. Let me return to the list of four commitments, but this time showing how poorly they fare as exceptionalist proposals:

- Reactivity is only special to social sciences if *only* classification of humans is productive of new phenomena; namely if *only* the social, and not the rest of the living world, reacts to being studied in the relevant way. This is not true: all inquirers face the danger of interfering with their objects of study and life scientists also create kinds – for example, domestic plants and animals – kinds that would not have existed if it wasn't for their work (Cooper 2004). The claim that natural sciences do not face the problem of reactivity is a caricature of life and medical sciences. If, in response to this, the exceptionalist argues that human reactivity is special, she cannot use reactivity on its own to buttress her exceptionalism.

¹¹ These are the themes of histories of science by Ted Porter 2020, Lorraine Daston 1991, John Forrester 1996.

- Interpretation via empathetic engagement fails as a defining characteristic of all and only social sciences twice over. First, social scientists sometimes make macro-claims that do not involve empathetic engagement (for example, Thomas Piketty's explanation of inequality in terms of rates of growth and return to capital). To dismiss such explanations as bad social science is just as reckless as if naturalists rejected the appropriateness of interpretation to some projects in social research. Second, natural scientists, say, comparative psychologists, deploy empathy to interpret mental processes of animals. Empathetic engagement is valuable without being either necessary or sufficient in social sciences (Khalifa 2019).
- Historicity is also a non-starter for grounding exceptionalism. The ideographic concern with specificity and the provenance of phenomena is present in many different sciences, natural or social. The historical sciences is a far wider category than just human history and plenty of natural processes, whether cosmological, geological or evolutionary, have essential historical, rather than universal features, thus requiring explanation via narratives (Currie 2018).
- Critique, insofar as it is used for exceptionalist goals, implies that natural sciences can operate in a world devoid of values, that natural scientists do not owe respect to the world they study, and that they can dispense of moral responsibility towards their objects of research. Responsible natural scientists do not typically subscribe to this dangerous stereotype. This is true even of nuclear physicists, let alone of life scientists who study animal bodies or environmental systems.

Again I realise this way of arguing comes across as much too quick.¹² My goal here is not to engage with reactivity, interpretation, historicity, and critique in detail. Rather it is to show that the favourite exceptionalist strategies create very similar dangers, namely the

¹² I intentionally omit discussion of influential work in social ontology that too has exceptionalist ambitions. Even if we went along with Searle 1995 and granted that some social phenomena have a special ontology due to their dependence on norms and speech acts, this would not exhaust all of ontology relevant to social sciences and hence cannot be used to ground full exceptionalism.

danger of exaggerating the distinctiveness of challenges faced by social scientists. Although these challenges are real, they fail as watertight exceptionalist proposals. The dilemma is parallel to the one I formulated for naturalists: describe the supposedly distinctive features of social scientists too narrowly and you fail to account for the diversity of social sciences; describe them too broadly and exceptionalism ceases to be informative.

5. Against Contrastivism

Now we are in a position to appreciate the weakness of contrastivism as a whole. It begins with some dominant image of knowledge and defines social science in contrast to it. For naturalists the contrast has been supplied by religion, scholastic philosophy, literary hermeneutics, Marxist history, while for exceptionalists the contrast has been Newtonian natural philosophy, experimental psychology, evolutionism, positivism, sociobiology, and so on. In each case the features of the dominant image shape the features of the account of social science. As the contrasts change, so do the accounts. This is why the exceptionalist vision of Collingwood is so different from Winch's. For Collingwood the ambition was to vindicate history as the model for social knowledge. He bemoans the Enlightenment ambition of a science of human nature for its failure to uncover the 'inside' of social life (1946). Winch (1958), on the other hand, is responding to the rise of logical empiricism, especially the influential account of explanation and of hypothesis testing by Carl Hempel and other descendants of the Vienna Circle. As an analytic philosopher, he pays no attention to history and instead uses linguistic and conceptual analysis to formulate a logic of intentional action. This action is grounded in reason-giving practices and therefore, he argued, we should reject the goal of causal explanation or of prediction. Both Winch and Collingwood use the main trope of exceptionalism – social reality is not natural reality – but beyond that their visions for social science are different.

This diversity is unsurprising if we treat the various exceptionalist and naturalist proposals as *speech acts* aimed at a target perceived as a threat or an opportunity. This is also why these proposals fail when we judge them by the standard I have been using – as

accounts of the goals and methods of social science for this moment.¹³ Instead the exceptionalist proposals function as acts of resistance to whatever hegemony operates at the time, while the naturalist proposals typically function as endorsements of a dominant approach. Because the hegemonies do not last, neither do contrastive accounts. So the failure of contrastivism is that it is driven too much by the anxieties of philosophers and not enough by the needs of communities that benefit from having social sciences.

I am not the first to point out the problems with the various naturalist or exceptionalist visions and one popular reaction is to endorse pluralism.¹⁴ Pluralists emphasise the many different goals of social science: measurement, interpretation, causal explanation, critique, and so on. Some of these goals are easier to classify as naturalist and others as exceptionalist, so both are wrong as complete accounts. This reaction is attractive in the ecumenical impulse. Pluralism of methods and theories is generally a plausible stance in philosophy of science (Chang 2012). However, pluralism is strongest when driven by a substantive argument about the need for more than one method or theory. It should be principled, rather than motivated by poverty of either naturalism or exceptionalism alone.

This poverty alone does not explain why social science should be pluralistic and how it should apportion its resources and energies. If pluralism is driven only by the failure of the two contrastivist strategies, then it amounts to no more than a quietist desire to let all flowers bloom without offering a well-grounded normative account of how social science could be better. Contemporary social sciences fight many battles, internal and external.

The live controversies include:

- What should be the role of formal modelling versus empirical work in economics?

¹³ A prime example of contemporary exceptionalism driven by opposition to perceived dangers of the day is Bevir and Blakeley 2018. These authors oppose various trends in methods of political science that they identify as stemming from naturalism: failing to make room for agency, values, contingency, history. But to the extent that those are genuine failings, they are not failings due to being too similar to natural sciences. Rather they are failings full stop.

¹⁴ Little 1991, Bohman 1991, Roth 1988 are key examples of the pluralist stance.

- Should there be a line between scholarship and social activism?
- Must social research be more participatory and how?
- What is the significance of replicability and failures thereof and how to implement responsible practices?
- What is the proper role of biological factors in the explanation of social phenomena?

...and many more. Tackling these questions requires confronting big decisions about what we need social science to be. Once we recognise that these are decisions to be made, rather than puzzles to be solved by examining the timeless and essential nature of social reality, we abandon the contrastivist stance and adopt a constructivist one.

6. Towards Constructivism

Constructivism is an anti-realist stance familiar from metaethics, philosophy of mathematics, and social ontology. Constructivism about normative properties such as 'good' or 'right' is a view that, while no natural mind-independent facts ground these properties, they nevertheless can be authoritative if they are grounded in judgments that rational agents endorse under the right conditions (Bagnoli 2021, Rawls 1980).

Constructivism about social kinds such as race and gender is a view that these properties cannot be defined without reference to social facts about power and subordination (Haslanger 2000). This latter constructivism is well-known to social scientists, given their frequent ambition to denaturalise and defamiliarise existing social arrangements. Also familiar from sociology of knowledge is constructivism about the end products of scientific enterprise, that is, facts and theories.

But I am after a different constructivism. To seek a constructivist account of social science is to deny that there is an essence to social science independent of needs and priorities of a community that undertakes to produce such knowledge.

I venture the following statement:

Constructivism: Social science is any credible inquiry a community needs to understand itself and others and to improve its life as a community.

Let me unpack the central terms:

- *Credible inquiry*: this expression picks out the requirement that social science is an inquiry that proceeds according to social epistemic norms, for example, those Longino 1990 articulates for objectivity or those that Robert Merton identified with ethos of science (equality of intellectual authority, open criticism, communism, and others). This condition is designed to exclude other forms of knowledge that may be helpful for communities' self-understanding such as myths, literature, or religion, but without being science.
- *Community*: this invokes the idea that social science is necessarily a collective undertaking, not one for a philosopher king or an expert social planner. The constructivist need not assume that the community is somehow unified and monolithic, a key theme in most political theories from Habermas to Dewey. It can be a community made up of multiple publics who do not always share values but who are forced to come together to make decisions. This multiplicity provides justification for the role of social science in democracies and may ground the desirability of theoretical and methodological pluralism. Moreover, the constructivist need not assume that only humans make up the relevant communities. How broadly to draw the circle and which creatures and systems get to count as having epistemic interests is matter for ethical reflection and experiments in living.
- *Self-understanding*: the point of invoking *self*-understanding, rather than understanding more generally of nature, is to focus our attention on constructivism about social science specifically. There may well be constructivism about science in general (indeed this is what Kitcher 2001 ideal of a 'well-ordered science' is pointing to). My brand of constructivism is a subset of this view, because it picks out the attempt of a community to build a social inquiry whose subject matter is our life as a community. So the 'self'

here refers to us, the crowd who undertakes to know itself.

- *Need*: I formulate constructivism in terms of 'needs' of a community, as opposed to the preferences or desires of its members, to emphasise that good social knowledge can challenge a community and make it uncomfortable in a way that this community may not like. There is a longstanding idea in sociology that its point is to disturb and to expose social arrangements that seem natural and inevitable (key themes in Bourdieu and critical theory). Such gadfly science that holds up the mirror is needed even when it is not desired or valued by the majority.
- *Improvement of communal life*: While self-understanding encompasses knowledge without necessity of practical application, 'improvement' captures the latter. The idea that one of the goals of social knowledge is to relieve suffering and to enable thriving is common to many traditions and it is hard to imagine today's social sciences without such an ambition. This is why social scientists use evaluative concepts such as quality of life, resilience, frailty, wellbeing, progress etc. Embracing such concepts is an implicit rejection of some, though not all, value-free ideals of science. These concepts also force us to consider whose values should ground them and what forms of public participation in research can help. True, the ambition of improvement can result in abuse of power by social scientists. After all they were key players in colonialism and other kinds of tyranny. Constructivism does not assume that social science is by definition a good thing.

Now that the key features of constructivism are in place, we can look back on how much it improves on contrastivism, whose poverty is my main motivation. My reasoning is that something like constructivism has got to be right if we are to get past the failures of naturalism or exceptionalism. This claim to superiority faces a few obstacles and in the remaining space I face the key objections because I believe them to be ultimately surmountable.

7. Defending constructivism

The first challenge is to ask whether constructivism is sufficiently different from contrastivism. My version of constructivism relies on the notion of ‘community’ that undertakes to understand itself and others. It is a necessary reliance because without it constructivism could be about any knowledge at all, not knowledge recognizable as social science. What is a community and what does it mean for it to understand itself and others? Arguably these questions are answerable only through a prior inquiry not unlike the familiar social science or social theory. And yet I spurned the contrastivist project of finding the *sui generis* sphere of the social as distinct from the sphere of the natural. Have I not sneaked in through the back door the very theoretical resources I argued failed?

Not quite. The contrastivist project, especially of the exceptionalist ilk, relies on the primacy of social ontology – the idea that before we can do any social science the philosopher needs to articulate its ontology, including what community is.¹⁵ This is inimical to the spirit of constructivism. The constructivist starts with the lived experience of beings facing together challenges of cooperation, limited resources, conflict. It then builds the idea of social science on the basis of these concrete practical problems. Whatever knowledge enables tackling them is what social science is, at least initially. Afterwards we might come up with systematic theories about the nature of community, improvement, self-understanding. But these theories ultimately stand on a pragmatist foundation instead of functioning as the first philosophy. They might be buttressed or laid bare by political activity – who and when gets to be a community is a matter of who gets to claim rights and recognition. What demands qualify as ‘needs’ and what changes constitute ‘improvement’ are exactly the issues that get negotiated through politics. Constructivism, through its emphasis on the needs of communities to decide the scope of social science, is sensitive to this.

This might look like buck passing: I undertake to resolve one problem – an account of

¹⁵ For an example of the ‘ontology first’ view see Lawson 2019, see Lohse 2017 for a critique.

social science – by opening another front. But I do not see an alternative. The idea that any account of responsible science inevitably steps into the sphere of politics is familiar from contemporary social epistemology. There are now well-developed conceptions of science that start with the need for effective social organisation of research and the role of stakeholders in determining the priorities and the methods of inquiry. For example, Kitcher 2001's idea of a 'well-ordered science' focuses our attention on the place of democratic institutions in shaping the agenda of research. A well-ordered science is not one that produces knowledge of true facts, but one that is organised in a healthy and effective way to produce knowledge that responds to the priorities of the community that enables it. Ongoing initiatives, such as the Open Science Movement, movement for pluralism in economics, citizen science, all emphasise the need to devise and promote robust scientific institutions that encourage high quality work, ensure that there is due variety in topics and in methodologies, protect and nurture the right type of criticism and correction.

Seen from this point of view, constructivism departs from contrastivism by focusing on healthy practices in social research ahead of deciding its proper sphere and ontology. While contrastivists draw up the ideal of social science on the basis of some timeless vision of what societies are and how they can be known, my constructivist undertakes an exercise in social negotiation of knowledge production, an exercise that is necessarily historically and culturally local.

Suppose the reader granted me the first contention – that constructivism is enough of a departure from contrastivism to be interesting – would they also grant its initial plausibility? This is the second challenge.

As formulated, constructivism includes too many projects that are not *intuitively* part of social science. What knowledge does a community need to understand and improve itself? Likely not just what we now call economics, sociology, anthropology... Good communal living also demands understanding of health and disease. That would include medicine. Civil engineering and architecture studies physical infrastructure to keep us

warm, safe, productive, and moving to places we need to. Are these all social sciences according to constructivism?

This, I believe, is a feature, not a bug of constructivism. Constructivism is supposed to yield counterintuitive results because it is not meant to capture all the existing practices. Rather the hope is to explicate the concept 'social science' to make coherent some of the existing practices and some plausible ideals about the point of social knowledge. Social sciences today do not fully line up with what social sciences should be according to constructivism and naturally so. Today's arrangements implicitly endorse disciplinary boundaries that owe their existence to historical contingencies and institutional arbitrariness, rather than to defensible epistemic reasons. Given the contrastivist provenance of the category 'social science' as neither natural science nor humanities, it is inevitable that certain features of today's status quo will conflict with constructivism. Is it bad that portions of public health and civil engineering should count as social sciences? It doesn't also prevent them from functioning as natural science in other contexts. Health and infrastructure are social through and through and we fail to understand them properly if we do not practice them alongside sociology and economics. That's the ambition behind the many calls for interdisciplinarity and constructivism supplies the rationale for these initiatives.

Perhaps the worry is that under constructivism there is no effective beginning and end to the category 'social science'. Any knowledge, even astronomy and geology, could in principle meet the need of a community to understand and improve itself if the conditions are right. If so, constructivism potentially erases all distinctions between the social and natural sciences, in which case why even aim at a constructivist account of social sciences in particular?

My reply is to partly to bite the bullet and partly to appeal to practical constraints. Imagine a community that starts to organize their knowledge production from scratch. They may well not adopt the distinction between knowledge of the natural and knowledge of the

social, thus spurning the cleavage that our intellectual tradition seems stuck with. To this community the distinction between social and natural sciences might seem artificial and unhelpful. They might divide their epistemic labour differently and that will depend on their conceptual and practical starting points. Maybe they see themselves as inherently part of nature and maybe their conception of sociality does not assume, like Rousseau did, that to become a social being man must leave nature. But for better or worse we are not this community. We are not starting from scratch. We inherited a division and my job is to improve on it. The constructivism I propose thus recognizes existing constraints: in our world, the social sciences command less prestige, power, and resources. Some philosophy of social sciences is an attempt to rationalize this, namely to give metaphysical reasons for why social science can never have strict laws or proper theories.¹⁶ I choose another route. Given the history of this dismissal and the general STEM worship of the last decades¹⁷, it may be wise not to eliminate the distinction between the social and the natural sciences. Such elimination will result in the absorption of social science into the natural ones, rather than the dissolution of the distinction. This is a reason to hold on to the category 'social science' and to strengthen it away from contrastivism.

My brand of constructivism thus carves a distinctive space for social sciences but also implies that portions of existing natural sciences, medicine, and humanities can sometimes function effectively as social sciences. Any epistemic activity, whether medicine, engineering, self-help, or journalism, can count as social science with respect to some of its aims and not others. All these fields can function as social, or natural science, or something else entirely, depending on the specific activities their practitioners undertake. When a social worker systematizes her knowledge about what struggling families need to flourish, she functions as a social scientist. When she keeps legal records of her interventions she functions as a bureaucrat. When an investigative journalist reconstructs a causal chain of a scandal, they function as a social scientist.

¹⁶ An example of this is many attempts to explain why laws of special sciences will never be as predictively successful as laws of physics (Rosenberg 2012).

¹⁷ See Lohse and Canali 2021 for evidence of such sidelining in the handling of the pandemic.

When they file a story with a catchy headline that ensures it will be read and distributed, they function as a hack or, depending on your perspective, the gadfly that any democracy needs. And so on. Constructivism invites us to see elements of social science whenever and wherever there is production of knowledge vital to a community's flourishing.

8. The future of constructivism

What makes an inquiry social science is not the special method it follows – whether unique or continuous with natural sciences – nor the special ontology it adopts. Contrastivism, naturalist or exceptionalist, is a dead end. In mounting this critique I rely on three recent achievements in philosophy: first, the progress in history and philosophy of science that shows the diversity of epistemic cultures in the sciences; second, the critiques of exceptionalist arguments about the supposed distinctive ontology and method of human sciences; third, the new understanding that good social epistemology presupposes political philosophy. Armed with these insights, I argued that the question about identity of social science can be brought back on the agenda of philosophers and that social science is any publicly certifiable form of knowledge people need to live together well. Constructivism invites us to construct the social science that answers our priorities as a community.

Much remains to be done. Merely stating the constructivist position does not tell us how to resolve deep longstanding disagreements about what sort of social science communities need. Indeed, the scholars whose views I classified as contrastivist or pluralist may argue that they already have been practicing constructivism all along, since the debate between naturalists and exceptionalists has been precisely about different ideals of social knowledge and their social relevance. Naturalists have typically endorsed what Daniel Steel has called 'the Enlightenment ideal' – the vision of social science as a repository of general causal knowledge that can warrant life-improving policies and regulations, while most exceptionalists denied availability of such knowledge. For constructivism to be a genuine alternative to contrastivism, it has to tell us who is right in that debate and it has to enable progress on substantive questions about what methods,

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concepts, ontologies, and in what combinations, to use and what institutions and norms produce healthy knowledge. All I say for now is that constructivism puts us in a better position to do so and, I hope, empowers philosophers to participate in these conversations on firmer foundations that do not depend on contrastivist myths.

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