

How Different Social Scientists Think¹

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Abstract: I illustrate how, based on my personal experience, different social scientists would study the same question. I argue that each brings different paradigms, perspectives, preconceptions and methodologies, none inherently superior to the other. I conclude that we need more genuinely interdisciplinary and less parochial ways of studying the world if we really want to understand it.

In my experience every social scientist thinks that other social scientists should be doing what they are doing. Asking the same questions (other types of questions are “boring” or “second-order”) and using the same methodologies. Economists, for instance, think they are the best because they have complicated mathematical models which nobody else understands and all other social sciences are “non-rigorous”. Political scientists think economists have an infantile obsession with mathematics, that the world is much more complicated than even the most complicated mathematical model, and argue that economists ask the wrong questions; they think that economic motivations explain everything, whereas in fact it is politics that explains everything. Anthropologists think that both economists and political scientists are clueless because they are looking for culture-free generalizations and they don’t really bother to understand the world or the nature of societies inhabiting it.

Let’s see these different approaches in action in an example from my own research. In rural Sierra Leone there are not property rights to land in the western sense of individualized freehold. Rather land is held collectively by kinship groups and extended families and there is a complex system of rights which allows people to claim access to the land to use or farm it. Land is, to a first approximation, not bought or sold. Let’s focus on the absence of a land market.

Economics is all about how great markets are and the First Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics states that in a system of individualized private property rights and perfectly competitive and complete markets (every good must be transacted through a market) the allocation of resources will be socially desirable in the sense of Pareto efficiency (it would not be possible to re-shuffle resources and make one person better off without making someone else worse off). Markets are

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what allocates scarce resources to their most valuable uses, so the absence of markets is paradoxical, or the equivalent of, as economists love to say, “leaving \$100 bills on the sidewalk”, almost unconscionable for a world full of rational agents.

Nevertheless, the theory of “market failures” can be used to develop a hypothesis about why there is no land market in rural Sierra Leone. A market provides a trading opportunity for everyone so it is a type of public good. In reality (if not in the mathematical model which generates the First Welfare Theorem) it costs resources to create a market, you have to set up a market place, or find ways of bringing buyers and sellers together and disseminating information about what can be transacted. For a market to begin someone has to pay that cost. But if they do then everyone, even those who do not pay the cost, can benefit from the creation of the market. This is in the nature of public goods. Such a situation immediately creates a free-rider problem. I have the incentive to let you provide the public good (market) because once you do then I can use it without paying any cost. The result, familiar from the theory of market failures, is the under-provision of public goods, hence no market.

It’s a logical argument and an economist would think of an implication of this model that could be tested with data. For example, the more valuable the potential land market transactions are, the more likely that a land market would exist. He might hypothesize that therefore in urban areas it would be more likely that land was transacted. He could hire Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), which has a Sierra Leone office, to collect some data and run a regression. He’d be right. Land is transacted in towns like Bo or Freetown. This wouldn’t be a “real test” of any theory, because it is just a correlation from an “observational” study. A real test of a causal hypothesis would involve running a RCT (Randomized Controlled Trial). In the present case this would be a difficult thing to do. It is hard to see how you randomly create a land market or whether if you randomly varied incentives you’d be able to induce someone to create a market where none existed. In this case the question would most likely be regarded as “un-researchable” (see Banerjee and Duflo, 2012, *Poor Economics*, Chapter 10 who present this view) despite its apparent centrality to economics.

So far nobody went to Sierra Leone. An economist might go, but only to supervise IPA in Freetown which would be particularly likely if there was a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) involved.

Though sending a graduate student would be better than going yourself. As a very distinguished

empirical economist and almost certain future Nobel Prizewinner once said to me: “the best dataset is one that someone sends to your inbox”.

How would a political scientist think about the problem of the absence of a land market? This is harder to think about because there are many sorts of political scientists (I have colleagues at Chicago who are “interpretivists” whose methodology and outlook is much closer to the anthropologists I discuss below). To a first approximation, there is only one sort of economist. Let me take this from the point of view of the average scholar of comparative politics (recognizing that there is a lot of variation). First of all, political scientists are not terribly interested in markets, so it’s not obvious that they’d find this an interesting question. If they did they’d dismiss the idea that it was economic motivations that explained the absence of a land market. They’d instead anticipate it was all about politics. One thing which might appeal to them is the nature of property rights. A natural pre-supposition would be that property rights are created by the state and there must be some political motivation for the fact that property rights are not individualized freehold. After all, in Western Europe in the Medieval period, there was common property which was subsequently “enclosed” and privatized. Why haven’t the same forces operated in Africa? One hypothesis stems from the fact that Western states developed modern “bureaucratic” Weberian features while African states are “patrimonial”. Thus a political scientist, fitting Sierra Leone into one of her standard paradigms, would hypothesize that the nature of property rights was a source of political power to a patrimonial state with the absence of individualized title facilitating patrimonial control, or clientelistic access to land. How would they research this question?

Unlike an economist, a political scientist could not be thought serious doing research on Sierra Leone without ever having gone there. They might even think about learning the language, though since the majority of people speak English, this is probably un-necessary (The only political scientists working in African who can speak an African language are the ones like Mai Hassan, Ken Opalo or Leonard Wantchekon, who actually are Africans). She would go to Freetown and interview scholars at the University and talk to politicians and journalists about the nature of property rights in land and how this is connected to the patrimonial state. She’d go “upcountry” and do some case studies, talking to local politicians, particularly paramount chiefs. She’d find plenty of evidence for the existence of a patrimonial state in Sierra Leone, and probably a few smoking guns about political elites’ attitudes towards the property rights regime. Some political scientists, depending on which

graduate school you went to, would collect data. One would need to vary the strength of patrimonialism and the nature of property rights. One hypothesis would be that the patrimonial state had much less control of people in the more modernized parts of the country and would be less able to sustain non-modern property rights which would be stronger in the rural areas where it could be enforced by paramount chiefs. This would suggest a correlation between urbanization, more individualized rights and a land market. She'd find this correlation, but would be much less concerned about the fact that it was observational.

Notice that now we arrived at the same correlation as we had before but with a completely different interpretation from that which an economist gave to it.

What about the anthropologist? An anthropologist when faced with this question might have ideas about why there was no land market based on his or her knowledge of the scholarly literature. But they'd neither pre-judge the issue of whether these ideas applied in Sierra Leone and they wouldn't come with existing theoretical ideas, for example from the theory of market failures or state formation. They would not believe it was "puzzling" that there was no land market because such a situation was inefficient and so again the question might well not interest them in the first place since "puzzles" tend to drive research questions, but "puzzles" are rather in the eye of the beholder.

Rather their approach would be very inductive. They'd learn local languages, Mende say if they were going to work in the south, and probably Krio too, the Creole which nearly everyone in Sierra Leone speaks. They'd plan to spend a lot of time, at least a year, in some local setting which might be rural or urban. The first thing they'd do is to ask ordinary Sierra Leoneans whether or not they'd like to buy and sell land. This would never occur to an economist as being relevant. It would occur to a political scientist, and they might even get to it after they'd talked to politicians and chiefs. Imagine an anthropologist did get interested in the puzzle and asked a rural Sierra Leonean about land sales. The answer they'd probably get goes something like this; how can I think of selling this land, my ancestors are buried under it, I am just a temporary custodian of the land I don't have any sort of right to sell it or give it away. So the answer would involve a completely different account of rights which involves the intervention of ancestors, and probably supernatural forces. This is a type of explanation that neither an economist nor a political scientist would think of because it's outside the scope of their paradigms. It would never occur to them to be relevant unless they asked a Sierra

Leonean in an open ended way. What would the empirical implications of this view be? Most Sierra Leoneans living in urban areas are still deeply connected to rural areas and the chieftaincy where their family comes from. When you pass away, you want to be buried there, even if you are living in Freetown or an urban area. So people are not buried under their houses in Freetown, and connections to ancestors do not stop the transaction of urban lands. We come back to the same correlation, but with a third interpretation.

Where does this leave us? Three social scientists, three different methods, three paradigms generating different approaches to a question with different ideas about what an answer might look like. Economists might have the most “powerful” methodological tools, but I think it’s clear that this doesn’t imply that they get closer to the truth. Intuitions, or puzzles based on the nature of western society, something deeply embedded in economic theory, don’t do a good job of explaining African institutions. Regressions, correlations, or even RCTs on their own can’t explain why people behave in the way they do. As I’ve illustrated, a particular correlation can be the result of very different mechanisms. To figure that out what the right way to think about this is you have to understand peoples motivations and their mental models better, and these can deviate quite radically from those that western economists grew up with. To know this you have to talk to them.

Nevertheless, this is not a plea for us all to become anthropologists. Everyone has their blinders and their strengths. Sierra Leoneans might say that they don’t sell land because their ancestors are buried under it, but there are no doubt other reasons. Moreover, it’s true, as political scientists argue, that the nature of property rights is politically constructed. The current system of property rights in Sierra Leone is underpinned by the power of paramount chiefs enshrined in the, still (amazingly!) operational, Provinces Land Act of 1927. If this were changed, then property rights might change. I also think that it’s true that whatever the reason land cannot be transacted in Sierra Leone, this has turned out to be very adaptive from an institutional point of view since independence because it has meant that rural people to some extent have been protected from the predation emanating from the national state in Freetown. You can’t expropriate land that cannot be transacted because it’s the patrimony of your ancestors. So political scientists are right to think about the politics of property rights. Moreover, economists have a methodology which can potentially sort out competing explanations of phenomena – multiple regression. That’s much derided by economists who laud

methodological purity above real social science, but it turns out to be a powerful tool for those who'd like to understand the world a little better.

The bottom line then is that the different social sciences all have strengths which are complements, rather than substitutes. They come with different methodologies, none superior to the other, and each have distinct skills. They also come with different questions and ideas about what might be important and why the world might be organized the way it is. To me, no social science is inherently superior. They all bring a lot to the table. Once you get committed to a methodology, it's hard to change, but you can learn a lot from how other people think about the world and you can use their questions with your methods. I think that's where inter-disciplinary research can start.

What are the implications of my argument for teaching economics and social sciences? The Report of the Post Crash Economics Society (<http://www.post-crasheconomics.com/economics-education-and-unlearning/>) rightly emphasizes the need to broaden the way economics is taught, admit there is more than one type of economics, and critically examine the values and assumptions built into "scientific" economics. From my own perspective, as a development economist and political economist, I would like to see a greater integration of perspectives and approaches from the other social sciences, along the lines I have sketched above. This involves admitting that economists don't actually understand, or understand only at a very superficial level, problems of development and that they desperately need the help and ideas of other scholars.