

– **SOCIAL SCIENCES AND URBAN STUDIES: Goodbye to Paradigms?**

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Abstract

The development of urban studies during the 1960s and 1970s was an offshoot of mainstream social sciences which, at least in Latin America, were formulated from a critical standpoint based largely on a renovated Marxism and the rise of the structuralisms. Now that this framework's apparently solid base has come under question in the so-called 'paradigm crisis', what is the outlook for urban studies and, in general, for the critical social sciences? This article poses a series of ideas which hopefully will contribute to a discussion on these and other aspects of a theoretical debate which cannot be ignored by urban researchers.

Foreword

This article originally appeared in 1992 in *Sociológica*, a journal published by the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, Mexico City. Emilio Duhau (1947–2013) was an Argentinian sociologist, but after the military coup of 1976 was exiled to Mexico where he achieved a masters and doctorate in urban studies. Since the early 1980s, he has been a central figure of critical urban studies in Latin America. His research, based on both quantitative socio-spatial analysis and qualitative research on urban everyday life, has been published in numerous books and articles, mostly in Spanish. His theoretical reflections on the role of urban studies in the development of critical social sciences, in Latin America and globally, are particularly relevant. We chose to translate this earlier text, written in the midst of an epistemological revolution in Latin America and elsewhere, as it is revealing and somewhat prophetic of what was to come in the following decades. Duhau reflects on what some have called 'postmodernism' and its relations with the renewal of Marxism. He further anticipates some of the contemporary debates on the role of the 'urban' in the development of critical social sciences, many of whose voices have been published recently in IJURR.

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For two decades or more, social sciences in Latin America, particularly in the urban studies field have been dominated by critical perspectives which deny the natural origins of the existing social order. As has repeatedly been pointed out, among these critical perspectives Marxist political economy, especially its structuralist variations, oriented most of urban research in Latin America and Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s. We all know that throughout the 1980s confidence in this prevailing paradigm was eroded. The drastic change in historical context and the resulting need

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to formulate new research topics was combined with the introduction of fresh outlooks concerning the role of social sciences. At the same time there was widespread recurrence to a certain theoretical and methodological eclecticism, which introduced a number of cracks in a hitherto apparently monolithic edifice, without necessarily involving an explicit break with Marxist political economy.

According to a widely accepted view of this situation, we are facing a 'crisis' in the social sciences and its paradigms. Whether or not we agree with this, largely depends on our understanding of what constitutes a crisis. From the perspective I try to put forward here, it is probably not so much the social sciences that are in crisis, as a particular conception of its nature and social role, including the definition of what critical social science aspires to achieve at this moment in time.

I place the idea of the nature and social role of critical social science at the centre of my argument because among my colleagues in the field of urban studies in Mexico, and more generally in Latin America, the predominant theoretical and practical reasoning assigns a critical role to the social sciences. The main theoretical argument reasons that neither the currently existing social reality nor prevailing trends follow 'natural laws', so consequently they are not immutable. I consider the main practical rationale to consist in our conviction that neither the existing state of affairs nor the siren song of neoliberalism are desirable social orders. It is worth recalling that the social sciences have always tended to play two main possible roles, as I think this forms part of the necessary collective discussion about their nature. The first role was to exalt the existing order—as was the case with both structural functionalism regarding the *pax Americana* from the 1940s to the 1960s and the fossilized Marxism that was the official ideology, in what until recently constituted socialist countries. The second role of social sciences has been to criticize the existing order, as has been the case of Marxism in Europe from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

Positivism and critical social science

In Latin America, the thinking and attitudes of researchers regarding scientific activity in the social sciences typically ranges from an unreflective acceptance of the positivist viewpoint to a concern for the social relevance of research. The latter is also often perceived from an Enlightenment perspective.

First we should remember what the positivist social science perspective implies.¹ It offers a naturalistic model for the social sciences that is based on the assumption of methodological monism for the sciences and of the clear separation of factual judgments from value judgments. Following this, social sciences are primarily concerned with identifying norms or general tendencies, and also with developing empirically testable theories, whose scientific status is directly related to their predictability and potential to be transformed into laws.² I believe that many researchers in the social sciences and in particular in urban studies, adhere either wholly or partly to this positivist concept, while at the same time advocating a model for critical social science.

But does a critical social science that is simultaneously positivist make sense?

¹ In developing this point I have based my arguments to a great extent on observations and suggestions from Lidia Girola. [Editorial note: See e.g. Duhau *et al.*, 1988;]

² For a formalized portrayal of social sciences applying the principles of logical positivism, see Wallace (1980).

It is not my intention here to challenge the positivist view or assign a positivist outlook to certain authors or trends in the urban context. Instead the aim is to illustrate the incompatibility between positivist social science and critical social science, thus revealing certain tasks and problems which I believe can be resolved, based on the adoption of a critical perspective in the area of urban studies.

Let us start with the problem of social laws and the difference between two closely related issues: factual judgments and value judgments. If one accepts that the aim of social sciences is to reveal laws (leaving aside the legal meaning of law, which prescribes what 'ought' to be), this means that we assume that social processes occur necessarily, or in other words adapt to 'laws'. Moreover it is knowledge of certain laws that makes it possible for the social sciences to 'predict' or to develop propositions that describe, with a certain degree of certainty, a future state of affairs. Evidently, if our interpretations of social reality are derived from natural laws, factual judgments can definitively be separated from value judgments. In this case, when reality does not behave according to our factual judgments, the reason given is that (as is generally accepted in some branches of the natural sciences, or at least in the versions provided by certain epistemologists) either we are unaware of or incorrectly specify the underlying determinants of events or, to the contrary, that the law is invalid or an error exists in the theoretical formulation of the law or laws in question. Now there seems to be consensus among social scientists with a critical perspective that social reality does not constitute a natural order. This implies that variations are possible and in constant transformation; these changes in orientation enable various possibilities, i.e. these are contingent. However, a critical perspective not only denies the natural character of the social order; it also criticizes it with a possible alternative, more desirable order in mind. From there, we might ask what values are being applied in judging the existing reality, as no criticism (denaturation of the social) exists without reference to other possible and more desirable situations. This means that the difference between factual judgments and value judgments is only relative; from a critical perspective, we tend to highlight facts from the standpoint of certain values.³ Furthermore, from a critical perspective, we often question naturalist or positivist approaches for conferring a 'natural' character to certain social relations and institutions: the same way that Marx mocked the 'Robinsonades' for their vulgar economics for naturalizing capitalist institutions, thus confusing instruments of labour with capital.⁴

For the neoliberal economist, there is no problem like the inconsistency between positivist social science and critical social science, as neoliberal theory defends the removal of barriers implied by state intervention in the economy that prevent the adequate functioning of the 'laws' governing free market and private enterprise. This reasoning thus naturalizes a particular social order, denying its historic and therefore contingent character. In other words, those who adhere to neoliberal economics can ignore the value judgements underlying their proposals, as they qualify as 'natural' a particular set of features derived from capitalist competition. Moreover, only the productive aspects (mostly technological innovation

³ This is true even when the 'fact' that is invoked is 'the point of view of the interests of the exploited classes' because, unless it is believed that these interests embody the 'essence' of a necessary historical development—which reintroduces an evolutionist or naturalist approach—this invocation implies an evaluative stance.

⁴ [Editorial Note: Duhau is referring to Marx's comments in the opening paragraph of *Grundrisse* where he likens Smith and Ricardo's portrayal of the isolated hunter and fisherman as 'Natural Individual' to the 'Utopias on the lines of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*'.]

and increased labour productivity) are incorporated as these natural features of capitalism; the more destructive aspects (recurring crises, conversion of a number of workers into surplus labour force, etc.) are ignored.

So what happens when a naturalistic perspective becomes merged with a critical perspective? I consider this has been precisely the case with Western Marxism and its urban studies offshoots. Among the basic tenets of Marxism is the historical character of capitalist society. Historical in this case refers to a social order, which like all those that preceded it, is based on the formation of certain types of social relationships that are neither eternal nor natural and will thus disappear as a result of the development of their own internal contradictions. In this explanatory model, based simultaneously on the 'structural' nature of these contradictions⁵ and on their resolution by class struggle, the naturalist and critical perspectives merge, thus originating what is possibly the principal weakness of the Marxist paradigm. According to this paradigm, there are laws for each mode of production that express an inherent contradiction between the development of productive forces and the social relations of production. In societies divided into classes, this contradiction is resolved by replacing outdated relations of production with new ones that accommodate the new productive force by replacing an existing ruling class by a new one, thus forming a new class structure. But how does the replacement of one ruling class by another happen? Is it the result of a structural process or by class struggle (the 'engine' of history)? Or is it that structural trends are really resolved through class struggle? In which case, what does this latter imply in terms of the role assigned by this theory of social transformation to social classes and their struggles? Suppose for a moment, as do several variants of Marxism, that class action and struggle are at the centre of our explanation of social dynamics. Do this action and struggle have contingent outcomes or do the results subject 'in the last instance' to the action of laws that regulate mode of production, as in the naturalistic model?

In my view, it is clear that this problem cannot be solved, precisely because naturalist and critical approaches are incompatible. The concept of the role played by the revolutionary subject capable of destroying bourgeois dominance and forming a socialist society—the working class and working-class movements that are at the core of the Marxist critical perspective—has always been fraught with ambiguities and contradictions in the logical sense of the word. Among other questions, these ambiguities and contradictions include the role of science in the formation and the triumph of the revolutionary subject, the identification of the conditions for victory and the significance of the development of capitalism itself for the triumph of the working class and the establishment of a socialist society.

Urban studies and the renovation of Marxism

I will not linger here to describe in detail the principal features of the paradigmatic bases, objects, questions and lines of inquiry that dominated urban studies in the late 1960s and during the 1970s, inspired by the renewal of Marxist political economy driven by structuralism. This task has already been accomplished to a great extent by researchers from several countries and regions where this approach achieved a dominant position, or at least had significant impact. This includes cases from France (Ganne, 1987; Godard, 1987; Topalov, 1990), the United States

⁵ Here I use the term 'structural' in the sense of a reality whose objectivity consists independently of social subjects. Of course, not all references to contradictions or structural conditions necessarily share this view of the objectivity of the social.

(Gottdiener and Feagin, 1990) and Latin America (Coraggio, 1991), with a number of examples from particular countries in the region including Mexico (Connolly *et al.*, 1991; Duhau, 1991). Instead, I will try to point out a set of core elements for a criticism (or self-criticism) of the assumptions and limitations of this approach. In my view, these core elements converge into what might be considered a flexibilization of the postulates of Marxist political economy, rather than a major overhaul of its basic assumptions. I shall also aim at providing a brief account of the new ideas emerging in the field during recent years.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the restructuring of the urban studies field was oriented by a renewal of Western Marxism in the context of the capitalist development boom. This coincided with the rise of the Left and, in general, with the emergence of other contestatory movements and ideas. This renewal was strongly rooted in the flourishing structuralisms⁶ and, in the urban studies context, by contributions from two authors in particular: Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas (1988 [1969] e.g.). By applying the concepts and assumptions of structuralism in the interpretation of these and other authors, the naturalist premises of Marxism were translated into a formalization of the analysis of capitalist structures, together with a thorough attack against what Althusser called the ‘problem of subject’. The question of ‘determination in the last instance’ was theorized to form a stratified view of social reality by means of the trio economy, politics, ideology and the duality between structure and practice.

Structuralist Marxism defined the ‘urban question’ clearly in terms of the ‘contradictions of capitalist urbanization’. In their analysis of these contradictions, urban scholars inscribed the city in the contradictory relationship between forces of production and social relations of production, as the central factor in the contradictory process of socialization of the forces of production. The state then appeared as a key element in this contradictory socialization.

In this urban version of structuralist Marxism, the critical element was defined by emphasis on the capitalist crisis and the view that this crisis would be resolved by the transition to socialism. In this context, the mission of the researcher was, among other things, to reveal the ‘true’ nature of state intervention, as destined to resolve the crisis and the contradictory nature of the socialization process, while at the same presiding over the structural logic of the real-estate activities of monopoly capital. The functionalism (not exempt from a certain instrumentalism) that underlies this perspective was tempered by the introduction of the class struggle and the correlation of resultant forces (the context). This introduced a contingency factor (given the impossibility of providing a deterministic explanation of changes in the correlation of forces), within an explanatory framework that was otherwise strongly deterministic. During the 1980s, this concept was the object of several self-critical reviews, whose main components can be schematically summarized as follows.

First, in terms of the analysis of the attitude towards social reality and its reproduction, it was recognized that social reality was viewed as a system of self-reproducing coherent structures that included class struggle in its dynamic; that a particular reality provided an explanation for the profound reality grasped by theory. The interpretation of events almost always brought us back to the same theory. Society came to be viewed as a process without a subject; the subjects moving the capitalist development process were neither the social classes, nor their organizations, but rather capital itself was the core factor (Coraggio, 1991: 88–100). This implies the

⁶ See Topalov (1990: sections 1 and 2) on this.

acceptance of a structuralist bias that ended up eliminating the relevance of social subjects and social action (at least concerning certain subjects and 'class' action) in the reproduction of society. This is recognized in the statement that 'urban research in the 1970s saw urbanization, public policy and social movements as the outcome of structural dynamics, as processes without a subject. It postulated that practices result from the interaction between features determined by the position of groups within the social structure and the external conditions resulting from the logic of capital accumulation and state policies' (Topalov, 1990: 197).

The second issue repeatedly brought up in critical reviews and self-criticisms is the reduction of practices and their subjects to the structures, so that society was reduced to a process without a subject. At an explanatory level, the structural Marxist perspective is also shown to be deficient because of the resulting functionalist bias expressed in concepts of political economy itself: 'there was a shift from a theory of contradictions towards a functionalist perspective' (Topalov, 1990: 193).

Finally, there is an apparent consensus in recognizing the instrumentalist bias adopted in the analysis of state and urban policies, with the predominance of a reductionist view of state power, of the phenomenon of power in general and of the factors which determine the design and implementation of state policies.

Throughout the last decade in Latin America, we can appreciate the persistent influence of the political economy of urbanization as a theoretical framework, albeit somewhat adjusted, partly as a result of attempts at self-criticism. But also we see the emergence of a new set of guidelines that are generally not explicitly labelled as belonging to any particular way of thinking, but without doubt have considerably redrawn the map of urban studies in Latin America.

This reorientation of urban studies produced in the 1980s has been described by José Luis Coraggio (1991: 88–100) as the shift from emphasis on the centrality of the state to the centrality of civil society; from macro to micro; from the central role of planning to spontaneity (and the market); from the general to the particular; from science to popular knowledge; from determination in the last instance to a multiplicity of factors; from socialism to democracy and from the national project to everyday life. Although we partially share this view, there are also good reasons for rescuing other aspects of the reorientation that has taken place in urban studies. Thus, following my own review of its development in Mexico during the last decade (Duhau, 1991), I would like to propose the following alternative reading of these tendencies.

The shift in focus from the centrality of the state to the centrality of civil society can also be interpreted as a shift of emphasis on state functions to forms of hegemonic domination, contestation and constitution; from a view of the state as a pre-constituted entity that operates 'on' society to the analysis of the reproduction and transformation of state power through the ruler-ruled relationship.

The shift from macro to micro can be seen as a transition from the deductive mode of inquiry to the interrogative mode. In other words, it is no longer about limiting the significance of urban processes to their 'function' in the reproduction of capitalist urbanization but, rather, about interpreting their reproduction and transformation as multidimensional processes.⁷

⁷ This change is adequately illustrated by the changes concerning the analysis of irregular settlements in Mexico. In the 1970s, research on the popular urban periphery aimed to show how this was the result of the contradictions of capitalist urbanization. Urban research from the 1980s recognized 'popular urbanization as a key mode of production for the city and organization of urban space ... it identified a type of urban space as a simultaneous expression of spatial segregation, an arena for reproducing the working classes, for the reproduction and contestation of relations of dominance that link these classes with the political system and to the state, through territory. A place where the social relations of

The shift from planning to spontaneity can also be defined as a transition from overvaluing the regulatory capacity of the state and its functionality for the accumulation of capital, to the urbanization process viewed as a result of the intervention and practices on the part of a multiplicity of actors, including public bureaucracies and a number of state apparatuses.

The shift from the general to the particular can, in turn, be viewed as a transition from a general discourse on the city based on theoretical deduction, towards recognition for the need to characterize and interpret those practices, whose reproduction can explain overall trends in urbanization.

The transition from science to popular wisdom has also implied a transition from the deduction of social practices to an attempt to characterize and interpret them. In this sense, I consider that the restructuring of urban studies has not simply meant that the return of the individual has implied what Topalov (1990: 199) has termed 'the rehabilitation of positivist evidence that [the individual] is the ultimate subject of the action, who knows what (he or she) is about'. It also, to a great extent, recognizes that individual and collective practices are not the product of 'structures' but instead social reality is structured, in so far as social actors, through their action, reproduce social practices and relations.⁸

The shift from determination 'in the last instance' to a multiplicity of factors can also be defined as the transition from the layered view of the social (one of whose variants is economicism) towards the recognition of the multidimensional character of the social.

Finally, the shifts of focus from socialism to democracy and from the national project to daily life, in contrast to the other transitions, do not involve changes in the theoretical precepts, but rather practical preoccupations of urban research. These may also be defined as transitions from practical motives sustained by a socialist utopia and a belief in comprehensive projects for social change, to the dismantling of this utopia and this belief, as a rationale for research practice.

Elements for a critical reorientation of urban studies

It is clear that regardless of how we characterize the reorientation that has taken place in urban studies, it is inadequate either to demand a return to the origins that would be resolved by 'correctly' and 'flexibly' applying the dominant paradigm of the 1970s, or to limit oneself to a naive celebration of these new orientations. From a theoretical point of view, an attempt to smooth over the cracks in the old edifice seems unpromising, while today's new orientations are far from being based on, or from providing, a more or less organized corpus of theoretical and conceptual tools. From the practical point of view, it seems futile to try to cover the sun with one finger,

ownership and legal forms result in the creation of actors dependent on various forms of occupation and appropriation of land and where the reproduction and transformation of popular culture is expressed in a multitude of practices for the production of habitat, of survival strategies, networks of solidarity, gender relations and subordinate and autonomous forms of social and political organization' (Duhau, 1991: 245).

⁸ Undoubtedly, the author who has made the greatest contributions towards an in-depth review of the concept of structure and the reconceptualization of the relationship between structure and practices is Anthony Giddens (1984).

clinging to the reconstruction of old utopias or building new, 'scientific' ones;⁹ a pretension that today is socially discredited, probably with good reason.

In this context what, then, are the tasks to be undertaken in order to promote theoretical and practical development of critical urban studies? As with any diagnosis, I think it is possible to separate some guidelines and questions about certain issues from the foregoing description, which neither the revision of the old paradigm, nor the new orientations appear to have addressed in a sufficiently radical way, to enable a break from, or at least a questioning of, certain basic underlying assumptions. I think these issues can be identified at three levels: basic theoretical assumptions, the concept of social sciences, and the possible nature and orientation of a critical social science and, consequently, of critical urban studies. Of course (and obviously not only for reasons of time and space), I will limit myself to outlining certain problems that I think require attention, adding a few suggestions.

As for fundamental theoretical assumptions, there are at least two central issues that should be addressed. The first concerns the design of structures and the structural. In this sense, it is manifestly inadequate to make structural determinism more flexible by introducing actors, culture, subjects, etc., as contingent elements that should be taken into account 'along with' the structural. Instead, what is needed is a review of our understanding of structure from a critical perspective, in the light of contemporary developments in the social sciences.

The second problem relates to the stratified view of social reality. Either by clinging to the idea of economic determinism, or when we attempt to highlight non-economic aspects, generally we tend to share a handed down 'factorial' view of the social. If we consider the economic to represent the most important 'factor', we tend to add other social dimensions, among many other 'factors' which may or may not modify or condition the economic. If this is not the case, we tend to combine many different dimensions to act as explanatory 'factors'. Is there no other way, apart from the unfinished and endless discussion about the relative hierarchy of the different aspects of social reality, portrayed through images or ideas such as structure–superstructure, economic structures, political and ideological, social subsystems, etc.?

Regarding our understanding of the social sciences, I think the current situation reflects management of a heritage that has been little or poorly thought out. It is a legacy in which the old Enlightenment principles converge with elements derived from logical positivism and the Popperian response to that positivism,¹⁰ together with others derived from the developments that formulated the concept of the 'problematic' as an exclusive and closed set of basic assumptions for the purpose of conceptualizing reality.¹¹

With regard to the Enlightenment heritage, our idea of rationality still appears to be anchored in a supra-historical and supra-cultural 'Reason', whose predominant incarnation would be modern science, conceived as a cumulative body of knowledge that, when properly communicated to the appropriate stakeholders, would be able to influence their behaviour and enable them to design a scientifically based project for social transformation. From this perspective, the social sciences could then be

⁹ This is not to deny the importance of utopian thinking and proposals in social transformation, but does mean assuming that social utopias tend to be relativistic and possibilistic in nature and are not presented as emerging alternatives for the *necessary* evolution of society.

¹⁰ Obviously, there are substantial differences between logical positivism and the Popperian proposal. However, social scientists may find themselves with more extreme elements of positivism, in the form of a naive operationalism, adhering to the hypothetical deductive method formulated by Popper. For the main tenets of logical positivism and Popper's critique of these, see Popper (1977).

¹¹ This issue was introduced above all by Althusser (1976).

translated into propositions for social engineering whose application, depending on the model of society that in each case is considered desirable, would lead to 'true' democracy, 'real socialism' or 'real' open competition.

But is it only common sense that is correctable in the 'light' of scientific 'truths'? Do the social sciences simply play a role of illustrating the action of individual and collective actors? Is it not naive and patently false in the light of current developments to assume that the social effects of the social sciences are fundamentally about the transfer of the 'objective' knowledge to social actors that they themselves produce? Rather, in as much as they form part of the process assigning meaning, defining social facts and construing common sense and enlightened knowledge, do the social sciences not produce effects concerning the conservation and transformation of the social order, institutions and practices?

From logical positivism and Popper's response to it, we have incorporated the view that 'Science' with a capital 'S' is constructed through the interaction between theoretical propositions and empirical testing procedures that make it possible to contrast, correct or refute these; but also, that theoretical developments should lead to a nomological explanation of observed regularities and in the ultimate instance to the definition of laws. Likewise, in the 'problematic' approach, we have become convinced that all research that does not rely exclusively upon a restrictive core of categories and concepts is, by definition, inconsistent or, at worst, 'eclectic'. However, it would be difficult to argue that either the methodological and theoretical heritage that we carry, or what we do every day as social scientists is significantly similar to the procedures prescribed by these models; and not because, as is often argued from a positivist perspective, the social sciences have not advanced sufficiently or that they are too young as sciences. Instead, it is because these models provide a mistaken view both of what social sciences are and what they should be.¹²

Finally, with respect to the meaning and current possibilities of critical social science, two questions may perhaps take central position. The first has to do with the relation science–practical reason; the second with the position and legitimacy of science (and scientists) *vis-à-vis* social actors and their interests. I have argued that the social sciences are upheld by theoretical and practical reasoning, in as much as they judge the realities they study, confronting them, implicitly or explicitly, with models of alternative, desirable or possible realities. There are a good number of pairs of concepts that are coined by the social sciences which sum up this comparison: traditional–modern, community–society, primitive–civilized, capitalism–socialism, authoritarianism–democracy, free competition–monopoly etc., etc. In this sense, the so-called crisis of paradigms in the social sciences is not primarily a crisis in terms of their explanatory pretensions, but above all, a crisis of their claims to be 'scientific' guarantors of a model that is 'superior' to the existing social order. North American structural-functionalism celebrated and sanctioned the superiority of American society, demonstrating this through a very complex development of a core set of opposing pairs (pattern-variables) indicating evolutionary trends that led to a higher stage of social development: expressed in contemporary North American society. Marxism presented the abolition of capitalism through the construction of socialism as overcoming all social ills. To do this, it reduced all forms of exploitation, domination,

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It would be futile to try to substantiate this claim here, introducing an argument in a paragraph or entire section. Nor would it be useful to refer to an authoritative argument by mentioning one or more established authors who adhere to this position. However, it is worth noting that this does not in any way negate the empirical character of the social sciences, which from our point of view is not incompatible with this type of interpretation.

injustice and all social conflicts to the confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, while an effective critique of socialist societies was avoided by applying the term of 'real socialism' to them.

Thus, if the crisis of paradigms consists for the most part in the collapse of their claim to act as scientific guarantors for a certain model of society, this implies that the practical justification for social science can no longer rely on this type of guarantor role. This also has a very important consequence: it legitimates a pluralism of practical justification for the social sciences. In other words, it is no longer possible to brandish reasons that pretend to be scientific, in order to *a priori* dismiss or recognize the primary or secondary importance of different issues as critical objects of the social sciences; class exploitation, women's liberation, democracy, environment, ethnic and racial questions have equal scientific and critical legitimacy. As a result, there has been a real decentring of our perception of social change.

With respect to the position and social legitimacy of social sciences, it seems we need to ask two questions: Does the paradigms crisis question the social role played by social sciences? If there are no scientifically prescribed models for society or for the social subjects that embody them, what is the cause to which critical social scientists should adhere?

To the first question, I for one would simply reply no. To the contrary, the crisis of paradigms has opened the way for social sciences to carry out in a more varied and richer manner, the social role that they have for the most part fulfilled: to provide a critique of social reality, interpret this reality and propose alternative routes and models for social change.

The second question, I think, refers on one hand to the issue of our perception of social change having expired and, on the other, to the resulting practical pluralism. What does this imply?: That there should be no formats or global strategies to assign *a priori* certain subjects or social movements a privileged role in social transformation. Or, as expressed by the poet: '*caminante, no hay camino, se hace el camino al andar*' (Traveller there is no path, the path is made by the travelling).

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