

# THE RISE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

Fulya ÖZKAN\*

\* Akdeniz University, Department of International Relations,  
fulyaozkan@akdeniz.edu.tr

**Abstract:** As a result of the rise of positivist approaches in the social sciences, different disciplines such as politics, sociology, history, anthropology, psychology and economics emerged during the 19th century. In order to attain objective knowledge, positivism divided reality into observable pieces such as the individual, the society, the state and the market each of which were examined by different social science disciplines like psychology, sociology, political science and economics respectively. Moreover, the rise of positivism was also accompanied by the rise of liberalism which emerged as one of the main ideologies of the 19th century in addition to nationalism and socialism. This also affected the study of social sciences by lessening the importance of interdisciplinary concepts such as the political economy which, until then, had argued for the interaction between politics and economy in the study of society.

As thoroughly examined by Immanuel Wallerstein, this understanding brought about a specific institutionalization of the social science disciplines where we encounter six major departments in the major universities of the 19th century,. These were political science, sociology, history, economics, anthropology and Orientalism. Anthropology mainly dealt with the so-called primitive tribes of Africa and the Oceanic world whereas Orientalism examined the former high civilizations of the Islamic, East Asian and South Asian worlds which were regarded to have ceased their historical development as a result of the rise of the Western powers since the 16th century. On the other end of the spectrum, the other four major disciplines focused on the Western world. In this academic division of labor, historians analyzed the past of the Western civilization, political scientists its state structure, sociologists its social life, and economists its market relations.<sup>2</sup>

However, during the course of the 20th century, interdisciplinarity, which advocated the interaction between different social science disciplines, gained more importance. Especially starting from the 1950s onwards, three developments contributed to this process: The first was the emergence of area studies as a separate research field and thus, the reflection of Cold War politics on the academia; the second was the new social movements such as the second-wave feminism which argued for the combination of the state and the society in social research and last but not least, cultural studies.

**Key Words:** Social, Twentieth Century, Interdisciplinary

**JEL Codes:** P2,P20

---

<sup>1</sup> Çalışma 10-12 Mayıs 2017 tarihinde Sırbistan / Belgrad'da ikincisi düzenlenen ICEBSS konferansında sözlü bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief history of social sciences see GULBENKIAN KOMİSYONU (1996a) 18. yy'dan 1945'e Kadar Sosyal Bilimlerin Tarihsel Kuruluşu. *Sosyal Bilimleri Açın*. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları; MIELANTS, E. (2005) Tepki ve Direniş: Doğa Bilimleri ve Beşeri Bilimler, 1789-1945. IN LEE, R. E. and WALLERSTEIN, I. (Ed.) *İki Kültürü Aşmak*. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları.

## 1. AREA STUDIES

Starting from the 1950s onwards, several factors contributed to the rise of area studies which, rather than dividing social sciences into the above-mentioned disciplines, argued for their collaboration. First of all, area studies gained popularity in the post-Second World War period when the United States started to act as one of the two main new world hegemon. As Mitchell Foucault asserted, knowledge was now power and therefore it was crucial to understand and know the way the regions, on which the new American hegemony was about to expand, would act in the international arena.

The age of empires, which already started to dissolve in the aftermath of World War I, was completely out of function in the post-Second World War period due to several reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, what is important for us here is the fact that decolonization had brought about the foundation of several new independent states. At the same time, the United States, as the new world hegemon, had displaced the United Kingdom which was the leading colonial power of the previous century. Therefore, in order to increase its power in the bipolar international system of the Cold War, the United States needed the support of the newly established Third World countries which also wanted to be a part of the modern world system. And to gain that support, the United States first and for most needed to know its new want-to-be allies. In this context, in the aftermath of World War II, anthropology and Orientalism, which were social science disciplines associated with the colonial policies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lost their prestige. At the same time, other disciplines such as political science, sociology, economics and history, which until then had dealt only with the political, social and economic characteristics of the Western world, needed to expand their vision beyond these borders.

Secondly, as the number of independent states increased, it was becoming more and more difficult to divide the world into the artificial scheme of the East versus the West because it could not keep track of the complexity of the social and political transformations of the new century. In this context, during the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the Non-Aligned Movement came forward as an alternative to the Cold War politics and was later on led by Yugoslavia, India and Egypt. The movement showed the artificiality of dividing the world into the East and the West in terms of either primitive and civilized as it happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or capitalist and communist as it was now happening in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, this artificial dichotomy of the East versus the West, the primitive versus the civilized, and the capitalist versus the communist was now replaced by another geographical conceptualization which was at least as artificial as the former ones. Especially in the United States, universities started to open interdisciplinary research centers and institutes which focused on the politics, sociology, economy and culture of a region as a whole like the Middle East, East Asia or Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, area studies may be regarded as a comparative and interdisciplinary subfield of international relations. It tries to explain the characteristics of a region with reference to different approaches which usually brings forward an interdisciplinary perspective. However, soon enough, area studies was also criticized for its problematic nature of determining where the borders of a region started and ended. One of the best

---

<sup>3</sup> GULBENKIAN KOMİSYONU (1996b) 1945'ten Günümüze Sosyal Bilimler İçinde Yapılagelen Tartışmalar. *Sosyal Bilimleri Açın*. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları, pp. 40-43.

examples of this problem is the way the meaning of the Middle East changed in the post-Cold War era. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Middle East was expanded to include regions like North Africa, Caucasia and even Central Asia in addition to the original conceptualization of the Middle East which usually started from Egypt in the West and continued all the way until Iran in the East. The major reason for this change was the region's recent identification with the religion of Islam. The theoretical framework of this change was provided by Samuel Huntington who divided the world into major civilizations. He called this understanding the *Clash of Civilizations*, but the major problem with this theory was its reflection of civilizations as unchangeable units.<sup>4</sup>

Another criticism to the area studies concerned its conceptualization of regions as unified structures in themselves. In contrast, critiques pointed out the divergence and plurality within each region. For example, although it was easy to identify the Middle East under the rubric of its religious unity, critiques underlined the differences between the region's states in terms of their political culture and social structure. Last but not least, area studies also ignored the interaction between different regions and assumed as if they never contacted with each other in terms of economic or cultural relations. Moreover, treating regions as isolated geographies was especially problematic in the increasingly globalized world and politics of the new century.

Even though area studies was criticized because of these defects, we still cannot ignore its contribution to the social sciences. As mentioned above, area studies was one of the first interdisciplinary approaches in the field. Secondly, new social movements of the 1960s also made a contribution to the emergence of interdisciplinarity in the social sciences as will be discussed below.

## 2. NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

New social movements of the 1960s was another factor that made social scientists turn their face on interdisciplinarity. These movements indicated the inefficiency of political parties in terms of their inability to represent the interests of all segments of the society. They were different from the social movements of the previous century in many ways. First of all, social movements of the 19th century mobilized the subclasses like the workers whereas new social movements of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century attracted more often the educated and the middle-class youth.

Secondly, new social movements were concerned more about post-materialist "quality of life" issues rather than material needs. For example the new youth cared more about the environment or individual civic rights rather than rising wages or fewer working hours. This was a result of the welfare state which increased the well-being of its citizens by providing an equal distribution of income.

Thirdly, whereas former social movements like socialism and nationalism shared little in common, new social movements (like the women's liberation movement, ecology movement, peace movement and anti-nuclear movement) all were combined under the rubric of the New Left. Unlike old-school Marxism, the New Left rejected the idea that an equal society could be only achieved by class struggle. For example, in his seminal work titled *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse claimed that the working class had already integrated with the capitalist economy due to the rise of social democracy which promoted state interventionism in economics in order to attain social justice. Therefore, according to Marcuse, the real actors of the social change in the new century would be

---

<sup>4</sup> See HUNTINGTON, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster.

the people who were sidelined by the recently established system of the post-Second World War era. In other words, they would be the ethnic and sexual minorities, university students and intellectuals who were figures of identity politics rather than class struggle.<sup>5</sup> This analysis was also confirmed by the seminal work of Andre Gorz entitled *Farewell to the Working Class*.<sup>6</sup>

Fourthly, unlike the movements of the 19th century, new social movements did not organize hierarchically. They formed networks which gathered masses around identity politics like gender rather than the political parties and interest groups of liberal social movements or trade unionism of socialism in the nineteenth century. Last but not least, unlike the social movements of the previous century, new social movements did not try to abolish the state or the established regimes.<sup>7</sup> They were part of the post-industrial society as suggested by Alain Touraine.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, whereas previous social movements were interested in economic issues which cared for the welfare of the masses, new social movements put emphasis on individuality and cared more for non-economic issues like the environment or Cold War politics. Therefore whereas old school social movements put forward class struggle, new social movements emphasized identity politics. Related to this, whereas the social movements of the 19th century organized in terms of large groups, new social movements of the 20th century were informally and individually organized.

Of course, just like area studies, the new social movements theory was also criticized based on several factors.<sup>9</sup> One of the basic criticisms claimed that the theory assumed the social movements of the 19th century to be mostly associated with the leftist ideologies. Therefore, other mass movements like nationalism of the late nineteenth century and fascism of the early twentieth century were mostly sidelined. However, critiques identified nationalism as the ideology that represented the interests of the modern nation-state just as liberalism was associated with the interests of the trading classes, conservatism with that of the aristocrats and Marxism with that of the working classes in the nineteenth century. Moreover, they pointed out that nationalism was a flexible ideology whose views could be easily revised based on changing state interests. Therefore nationalism could be regarded both as a leftist and rightist ideology based on changing historical circumstances.

Secondly, starting from the 1990s onwards, social movements became again economically oriented. In other words, as mentioned above, new social movements of the 1960s were in fact a result of the welfare state economics. As long as socio-economic problems were overcome as a result of welfare reforms, masses had the chance to focus more on non-economic matters. Especially starting from the end of the 1990s onwards however, problems related to income distribution and rising levels of inequality, which were consequences of both globalization and neo-liberalism, forced the masses to organize around movements based on economic concerns again. One of

---

<sup>5</sup> MARCUSE, H. (2007) *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London and New York, Routledge Classics.

<sup>6</sup> GORZ, A. (1987) *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, London and Sydney, Pluto Press.

<sup>7</sup> See ÇETINKAYA, D. (2008) Toplumsal Hareketler Derlenir Toplanır mı? & Tarih ve Kuram Arasında Toplumsal Hareketler. IN ÇETINKAYA, D. (Ed.) *Toplumsal Hareketler*. İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları; MARTIN, W. (2008) Sistem Karşıtı Hareket Arayışı & Dünya Hareket Dalgaları ve Dünya Dönüşümleri. IN MARTIN, W. (Ed.) *Toplumsal Hareketler, 1750-2005*. İstanbul, Versus Kitap.

<sup>8</sup> For the Turkish translations of key works on new social movements by prominent scholars like Alain Touraine, see ÇAYIR, K. (Ed.) (2016) *Yeni Sosyal Hareketler*, İstanbul, Kaknüs Yayınları.

<sup>9</sup> ÇETINKAYA, pp. 9-64.

the best examples of this was the anti-globalization movement which started with the Seattle protests in 1999 and continued up until the recent Occupy movements.

However, what concerns us here is not the new social movements theory in itself and how it was criticized but how the movements contributed to the social science literature in terms of interdisciplinarity. At this point, especially women's movement and second-wave feminism played a critical role. First-wave feminism of the 19th century was more focused on attaining equal civic rights with men like voting equality. Once this goal was achieved, they hoped that female members of the parliament would pass laws which would solve women's other social and economic problems. Therefore, first-wave feminism advocated making reforms which would enhance women's role in the public sphere. However, by the mid-20th century, even though women had formally and legally attained equality with men in the Western public world, unequal power relations continued to exist in the private sphere like the family life.

In this context, second-wave feminism came forward which, unlike the first-wave feminists, did not believe that women would be liberated as long as democratic reforms were made in the state structure. According to them, inequality among the sexes was observed not only in the political and public spheres but also in many other social aspects of everyday life. In order to change this, second-wave feminists thought that a social transformation was needed. In this context, their famous slogan was "the private is political." This slogan showed how artificial it was to separate social sciences into different disciplines like political science which focused on the state and sociology which focused on the society. Therefore, starting from the late 1960s onwards, women's studies came forward as a second major interdisciplinary field of the social sciences, in addition to the area studies of the 1950s. More and more universities started opening institutes and research centers which focused on women's studies with an interdisciplinary framework.

### **3. CULTURAL STUDIES**

Last but not least, in the 1970s, cultural studies emerged as a third interdisciplinary arena of the social sciences in addition to area studies and women's studies. Cultural studies emphasized the plurality of the social life by ignoring the universality claims of the social science disciplines which were divided into separate fields by positivism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cultural studies rejected the claim of positivist social science literature which cared for the discovery of universal knowledge or nomothetic laws that were assumed to be generally applicable to the whole world and humanity. Based on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, students of cultural studies defined culture as an arena of struggle and therefore concluded that class struggle was no more the only way of attaining social justice and an equal society. In contrast to the internationalism of class politics, cultural studies focused on values and norms that changed from time to time and from place to place. Therefore, its students suggested that the complexity of the social life could not be understood without paying attention to cultural traits and this dynamism inevitably required an interdisciplinary approach.<sup>10</sup>

### **4. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this paper related the emergence of interdisciplinarity in the social sciences to three major developments. Firstly, due to Cold War politics, area studies emerged in the United States as this new superpower of the Cold War wanted to

---

<sup>10</sup> GULBENKİAN KOMİSYONU (1996b), pp. 63-67.

thoroughly study its allies, especially in the Third World, from an interdisciplinary perspective. Secondly, second-wave feminism, with its famous slogan "private is political", showed that in women's studies it was essential to integrate research on the state structure with that of the society. And last but not least, cultural studies, with its focus on cultural traits which change from time to time and from space to space, necessarily required the combination of several disciplines.

## REFERENCES

- ÇAYIR, K. (Ed.) (2016) *Yeni Sosyal Hareketler*, İstanbul, Kaknüs Yayınları.
- ÇETINKAYA, D. (2008) Toplumsal Hareketler Derlenir Toplanır mı? & Tarih ve Kuram Arasında Toplumsal Hareketler. IN ÇETINKAYA, D. (Ed.) *Toplumsal Hareketler*. İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları.
- GORZ, A. (1987) *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, London and Sydney, Pluto Press.
- HUNTINGTON, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster.
- GULBENKIAN KOMİSYONU (1996a) **18. yy'dan 1945'e Kadar Sosyal Bilimlerin Tarihsel Kuruluşu**. *Sosyal Bilimleri Açın*. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları.
- GULBENKIAN KOMİSYONU (1996b) **1945'ten Günümüze Sosyal Bilimler İçinde Yapılagelen Tartışmalar**. *Sosyal Bilimleri Açın*. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları.
- MARCUSE, H. (2007) *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London and New York, Routledge Classics.
- MARTIN, W. (2008) **Sistem Karşıtı Hareket Arayışı & Dünya Hareket Dalgaları ve Dünya Dönüşümleri**. IN MARTIN, W. (Ed.) *Toplumsal Hareketler, 1750-2005*. İstanbul, Versus Kitap.
- MIELANTS, E. (2005) Tepki ve Direniş: Doğa Bilimleri ve Beşeri Bilimler, 1789-1945. IN LEE, R. E. and WALLERSTEIN, I. (Ed.) *İki Kültürü Aşmak*. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları.