

“What is Needed is Hard Thinking”

Five Challenges for the Social Sciences

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The announcement that I was leaving the Hewlett Foundation for LSE caught my friends and colleagues in the U.S. by surprise, and I got tons of questions. If I was president, what was this vice chancellor thing, was one I got a lot. chancellor and kept asking if I was being demoted. But the question I heard most was: why would you quit a job where you get to give away \$600 million dollars every year to causes and organizations you care about? Writing in *Inside Philanthropy*,

I want to begin with my answer to that question, which underlies what I want to talk about today respecting the present and future of LSE. As I have said to many of you, I missed being in an environment that was primarily about ideas. Ideas play a role in professional philanthropy, but are

ideas and to challenge ideas, including our own. And not just ideas in the abstract. Ideas that address the major issues and problems of society.

LSE has always appreciated this. Its

entry from September 1, 1894, Beatrice Webb wrote that she and Sidney did not want to spend the Hutchinson bequest on direct political engagement because:

Reform will not be brought about by shouting. What is needed is hard thinking.
What is lacking in [politics] is the leaven of knowledge. Sidney has been planning to persuade the other trustees to devote the greater part of the money to encouraging
Research
School of Economics and Political Science.

It was a novel idea then and still is: a school devoted explicitly and exclusively to scientific study of the problems of society and how to address them.

I took that as the main challenge coming into this position: Students and scholars at LSE were central in shaping thought and action on the major issues of the 20th

each other. There are versions that are direct, versions that depend on representation through elections, and versions that rest on representatives chosen by indirect means other than elections. And on and on.

In actual practice, there are almost as many forms of democratic government as there are governments claiming to be democratic, with different structures, rules for elections, forms of political parties, levels of participation, and more. And, of course, none of these systems meets its stated aim, in that all reflect popular will imperfectly at best; all invariably exclude certain groups, as a practical matter and sometimes formally; and all tolerate degrees of inequality of political power that cannot be squared with theory.

which I mean a government that satisfies two minimal conditions:

First, as a normative matter, the government is established on principles (say, in a written or customary constitution) that formally commit it to govern by the will of the people, and, as

younger people. Moreover, by almost every empirical measure we have, democracy is in retreat globally.

The reason for this is not, I think, the kinds of shortfalls that are the focus of traditional scholarship in the field. Those concerns matter, as I just noted, and they call for research and reform, but efforts to improve along these lines are insufficient and, paradoxically, can make popular governments less robust and stable. The reason is that there is also a *precondition* for popular government in any form to exist and persist — namely, that the people within a state or nation share a sense that they are part of the same political community, notwithstanding their differences and disagreements. If, instead, they see disagreements within their own communities as

country, deny their identity, or destroy their way of life, there is no possibility for any kind of shared government. The point is as old as the Bible. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote Jesus saying that

to desolation; and a house divided against itself

language Abraham Lincoln quoted prophetically in 1858, two years before the American Civil War.

We have long taken this sense of shared political identity for granted. Yet we now see it

terra nova

