

# Social Science Bites

A new podcast series with  
leading social scientists

[www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com)

In association with



# Roberto Mangabeira Unger on What is Wrong with the Social Sciences Today

---

**David Edmonds:** *He's a highly unusual social scientist: Roberto Unger has spent his academic life at Harvard writing about abstract areas of law, politics, philosophy, and teaching – among others – one Barack Obama. But he's also had a life outside the ivory towers, in politics: He wrote a political manifesto and was a minister in Brazil – the land of his birth. His theoretical ideas are difficult to pigeonhole, but one thing is clear: he's a vociferous critic of the entire discipline of social science - at least as it's currently practised.*

**Nigel Warburton:** *Roberto Unger, welcome to Social Science Bites.*

**Roberto Unger:** Thank you very much for this opportunity.

**NW:** *The topic we're going to focus on is "What's Wrong with the Social Sciences Today." I wonder if you could just begin by isolating the social sciences; what do you mean by "the Social Sciences"?*

**RU:** The social sciences are the outcome of an attempt to reproduce the practice and the success of the natural sciences in the study of society and of human behaviour. They, therefore, include economics (the most powerful and influential social science), sociology, anthropology, psychology, and – in a sense – law.

**NW:** *It's interesting that you include law in that list. That's an unusual one.*

**RU:** Well, all of our interests and ideals are nailed to the cross of the institutions and practices that represent them in fact. Law is the site of this crucifixion.

**NW:** *Well, what's wrong with the social sciences today?*

**RU:** The fundamental problem with the social sciences today is that they have severed the link between insight into what exists and imagination of what might exist at the next steps – the adjacent possible. To understand a state of affairs, for example in natural science, is just to grasp what that state of affairs might become under certain provocations or with certain circumstances that we impose on it. Well, what's happened in the social sciences is that this vital link between insight into the actual and imagination of the possible has been severed. The result is that the predominant methods in the social sciences lead them to be a kind of retrospective rationalisation of what exists.

**NW:** *That's really interesting. So, you're saying that the social sciences have moved away from the scientific model, in a sense, because a scientific model will deal with counterfactual situations – what would happen if I were to put this chemical into this particular test-tube, at this heat; whereas, the social sciences have moved far more into the area of descriptive analysis.*

**RU:** They have degenerated into pseudo-science.

**NW:** *That's quite a strong claim. Do you want to give an example perhaps of a pseudoscientific move that's been made within the social sciences?*

**RU:** Well, let's take the most important example – which is economics. The first flaw in economics is that it's a kind of logic; its theory is almost entirely empty of any causal or normative content. It's a logic machine

[www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com)

Unger January/2014

*You may view, copy, print, download, and adapt copies of this Social Science Bites transcript provided that all such use is in accordance with the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)*

operating under certain presuppositions. And it gains power only when these assumptions about causality or about objectives are supplied to it from the outside. The result is that economics is either pure and impotent or potent and compromised. The second flaw of economics is that it tends not only to identify rational maximising activity with the conception of a market but then will work momentously to identify the abstract conception of the market with a very particular set of economic institutions. The third flaw is that the economics that emerged from the Marginal Revolution of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is a theory of exchange or relative prices, almost entirely bereft from any theory of production. And the fourth flaw could be understood by analogy to Darwin's theory of natural selection. In contemporary evolutionary theory, there are really two parts: there's the part about competitive selection and then there's the part of the diverse material through genetic recombination on which the mechanisms of competitive selection operate. Well, what we have in economics today is like half of Darwinism; we have the theory of the competitive selection but no view of the creation of the *stuff* on which the competitive selection operates. Now, if you take these four flaws that I've just described, what they add up to is a pseudo-science. And that pseudo-science is powerfully enlisted in the service of apology rather than of explanation. Let's rebel against it, get rid of it and transform it.

**NW:** *I can see that there is logic and mathematics and the apparatus of science at play in economics. But in sociology, for instance, there is a great deal of awareness of the possibility that the practitioners are themselves in the grip of some kind of worldview, and there's a lot of self-questioning about the stance that people have taken, so it's not so easy to see that as a pseudo-science. It's almost acknowledging in its own self-description that there are wicked problems that they deal with that are affected by their observations; they're not straightforwardly scientific in the crude, simplistic sense of describing an objective reality out there.*

**RU:** It's a pseudoscience in a different way, and to understand in what way you have to form a view of the history of the imagination of structure in European social thought. The great revolutionary idea in classical European social thought, in the tradition that began with thinkers like Montesquieu, was the conception that the arrangements of society – the regime of society – is not a natural phenomenon; it is made and imagined. And you could radicalise this idea in the following way by saying the structures understanding them as both the institutional structures and the ideological structures are a kind of frozen politics; they arise as the result of the temporary interruption or the relative containment of practical and visionary strife over the terms of our access to one another. And then they appear to us as though they were *things* – as if they were a *fate* rather than what they really are which is our own creations naturalised. Now, what we have then in the history of classical social theory – exemplified by the most powerful theories like Marxism – is that this conception – this revolutionary insight into structure – was then circumscribed and eviscerated by a series of fatalistic illusions. First: the illusion that there's a closed list of systems of social organisation in history. Second: the illusion that each of these systems is indivisible. And third: the illusion that they're driven forward by laws of historical change. Now, what's basically happened in the subsequent history of social science – economics being a special case – is that the contemporary social sciences have tended to retract these necessitarian illusions only by abandoning, at the same time, the central idea of structure – that the organisation of society is made and imagined rather than just naturally there. And the result is a naturalisation of the present arrangements.

**NW:** *Some of the social scientists I've talked to, interviewing them for this podcast, have been concerned with changing the world. It's not that they're just painting a picture; there's an understanding that things aren't right and they want to change them. How does that fit within your framework?*

**RU:** I'm not presenting a conspiratorial view which associates social science with a deliberate conservatism – a defence of the established order. I'm saying that regardless of the political intentions of the social sciences, the intellectual practices that they now have available to them are largely deficient in what should be the vital element. The vital element is structural imagination – imagination of how structural change takes place in history and of how we can understand the prevalence of the existing arrangements without vindicating their necessity or their authority. Let me give you an example of how this problem becomes manifest. I propose to

[www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com)

Unger January/2014

*You may view, copy, print, download, and adapt copies of this Social Science Bites transcript provided that all such use is in accordance with the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)*

you an alternative that's distant to what exists. You say, "That's very interesting but it's utopian." I propose to you something that's close to what exists, you say "that's feasible but it's trivial." And thus in this current climate of opinion, everything that can be proposed is likely to appear to be either utopian or trivial. So it's kind of programmatic aphasia – a disorientation. It arises from a misunderstanding of the nature of a programmatic argument. It's not about blueprints, it's about successions; it's not architecture, it's music. Now, what immensely aggravates this false dilemma is that we have ceased to have faith in any understanding of how structural change takes place in history. We no longer believe in these large narratives like classical Marxism. And as a result of lacking any insight into structural change, we fall back on a bastardised conception of political realism which is proximity to the existent. So then we suppose that something is realistic if it's close to what already exists – then why do we need insight? So this is really a declaration of intellectual bankruptcy and what I *am* claiming is that the existing social sciences are part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

**NW:** *As I understand it, massive structural change is typically the result of war or massive technological change. Are there other sources of structural change? I mean, what do we put in the place of social science?*

**RU:** So let's take that example which you just gave. It's true that in the existing democracies in the world which are all flawed or relative democracies, the rule is: no crisis, no change. And contrary to the suppositions of classical theories like Marxism, under these arrangements the main impulse to significant change has been external – especially in the form of war and of ruin. Now, the question is: does it have to be that way? And I claim that the extent to which change depends on crisis is not an invariant element in historical experience but susceptible to modification. We can deliberately organise our political life or – more generally – all of our institutions so as to diminish the dependence of change on crisis and therefore as well the rule of the dead over the living. Then we come to think that these institutions that now exist – this present way of organising a market economy or organising democratic politics – is not necessary, that it is the contingent outcome of many successions of conflict, and that we can change these institutions; not just replace one institution by another (economic or political) but change the extent to which the institution is just there, as a part of the furniture of the universe – of the way things are. We can create institutions that make themselves more susceptible to challenge and change with the result that we are able to engage in the existing order without surrendering to it. Now, what I'm saying is that our practical interest in the creation of such arrangements is intimately related to our cognitive interest in the understanding of society and history, to the extent that we deny the contingency of the arrangements and deny as well our ability to change the quality or character of the structure, as well as its content, we misrepresent it, and then we produce superstition in the service of servility. The name of that enlistment of superstition in the service of servility is social science.

**NW:** *What would a social science of the future be like for you then? Because you seem to have damned social science as enthralled to the power structures of society, even when it seems to be challenging them.*

**RU:** So what is the task? The task is to rescue the central revolutionary conception of social thought - the idea that the structures of society are made and imagined, rather than just there – from the incubus of the fatalistic illusions. To radicalise the revolutionary insight; to explain the ascendancy of the present arrangements and the present assumptions in a way that dissociates explaining them from vindicating their necessity or authority. And, in this way, insight becomes the ally of transformative ambition.

**NW:** *Some of what you have described sounds a little bit like Karl Popper's ideas in The Open Society and Its Enemies: this notion that we shouldn't be caught in a kind of historicism that talks about change as taking place inevitably and the obsession with large-scale transformations based on perhaps spurious generalisations of philosophers and social scientists. Again, Popper was an advocate of making changes – piecemeal changes – how does your view differ from that?*

**RU:** This approach to society and history that I'm advocating is associated with the rejection of two errors – or two heresies – about structure. One error is what you might call "The Hegelian Heresy". That's the idea that there's a grand historical convergence or succession and, at the end, a definitive structure. Now, the truth is that there's never a definitive structure because no arrangement of society and of culture can ever do justice to who we are, to our powers of experience, of insight, of production, of association. Now there's the opposing heresy which one might call the "Romantic" or the "Sartrean Heresy". That view is that we can't really destroy the power of structures but we can temporarily shape them through romantic love and personal life or through the crowd in the streets in politics protests – revolutions. We can have these interludes of disruption of the structure and in those interludes we would become truly human and then later the structures will – once again – come down with the hand of Midas, killing the spirit with the regime. Now, these two heresies are both deficiencies at once of hope and of insight. And, what I believe is that over time we can create structures that allow us to engage in them without surrendering to them, and that the creation of such structures is intimately connected with our most fundamental material and moral interests. After all, we are the beings who are formed by context but who always transcend context.

**NW:** *What is the method, then, of good social science?*

**RU:** The method is to do something closer to what the natural sciences – in fact – do: to associate the explanation of what exists with the imagination of transformative opportunity. Not some horizon of ultimate possibles but the real possible which is always the adjacent possible; every social situation is surrounded by a penumbra of transformative opportunity. And then, the vocation of social science is to help us understand how we came to be in this present situation, in such a fashion that our understanding of our circumstance, rather than putting us to sleep and inducing this fatalistic superstition, awakens us to the imagination of the adjacent possible.

**NW:** *I can imagine many social scientists listening to this saying "Well, that's what I do! I'm interested in the role of women in a particular society, not just as a hobby. This is something I want to transform through a greater understanding of history and possibility." Are you being fair to social scientists when you're saying that they are somehow in the grip of an ideology which prevents them from having the imagination to transform the world?*

**RU:** It's not a personal condemnation. The issue is collectively to establish a method – an intellectual practice – which allows us to do this. What worries me is that there is a following mismatch in the world. The intellectual resources are concentrated in the rich North Atlantic democracies and in their academic institutions. In them, however, transformative opportunity seems to be a fantasy associated with the calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, in those parts of the world where the equipment for research and for thinking is most prodigal, the incitement of experience is weakest. In the rest of the world, outside, humanity is seething and searching. And one might think that the large emerging societies would then be the seats of resistance; they, however, are – for the most part – bent under the yoke of mental colonialisms. And they import, as their dominant ideas, the ideas of those rich countries in which transformation seems to be a fantasy. So this mismatch needs to be corrected on a world-wide scale and the whole of experience of humanity has to then become the provocation to the revolution of the disciplines.

**NW:** *Roberto Unger, thank you very much.*

**RU:** Thank you.

[ends]