How social sciences can contribute to changing a society

ON THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN ‘DIFFICULT TIMES’

WE SIMPLY DO NOT KNOW: ON THE BENEFIT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES FOR POLICY-MAKING

STRENGTHENING THE PILLARS OF DEMOCRACY

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SOCIAL SCIENCES HOLD UP A MIRROR TO SOCIETY

ASCN PROJECT: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA

INCLUDING ARMENIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

SOCIAL SCIENCES ARE THE LUNGS OF SOCIETY
On the role of the social sciences in ‘difficult times’

There is no doubt that within and beyond countries in transition, knowledge needs to be gathered to enable us to better understand the problems and the direction of the change these countries are facing. In quasi-authoritarian countries, such as Russia or Belarus, the political regime seeks to control the production of socially relevant knowledge, for example through politicising research and using it as an instrument to achieve social goals. The social sciences could thus consider it part of their function to reflect on the conditions of a free and democratic society, because this is in itself a precondition for the very survival of freedom of research, the existence of autonomous scholarship. This tends to be part of the background knowledge of the researcher in precarious transitional societies, much more so than is the case in stable, democratised countries.

It is precisely in transition countries that social scientists must, for a whole variety of reasons, maintain a certain distance from their environment and take care to protect their autonomy. They must point out that the ‘value’ or ‘benefit’ of political science or sociology, for instance, lies in the fact that these disciplines do not serve the interests of politics or the economic system, but instead analyse societal problems and the issues of the day from their own perspective, supported by their own methods.

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We simply do not know: on the benefit of the social sciences for policy-making

What political leaders need to know about the world in order to be able to govern it properly? Who can, and who should, tell them? This is where the social sciences come into play. But while policy-makers show little interest in explanations of past events, predictions are difficult to make.

WOLFGANG STREECK

The most ambitious goal of modern-day social sciences is to develop theories that explain observed facts as the effects of their causes. Why is it that birth rates have been falling for decades, voter turnout is declining throughout Europe, and large parts of Africa are failing to develop? Politicians, however, as people of action, are interested in explanations only when what is being explained has practical significance for them, allowing the causes claimed by the theory to be influenced by political means in such a way that their effects bring about change in a desired direction.

A theory that traces declining performance in school to accelerated biological development in adolescence may be correct or it may be wrong, but it holds no interest for political leaders (unless it can be used to abdicate the government from responsibility). It would be a different story if the explanation were increased class sizes; in this case, the determined cause could be used as leverage — by the government, to improve learner performance, or by the opposition, to hold those in charge accountable.

ABILITY TO MAKE PREDICTIONS

Politicians, while not very interested in explanations, are almost always interested in predictions. Predictions are also based on theories and are, essentially, also explanations, but of future states rather than present or past ones. Many researchers, including some social scientists, consider the ability to make predictions to be the real mark of a good theory. Since politicians must continually take a gamble on the future, they hold a similar view.

Thus, those scientists who promise information about how much the economy will grow or shrink in the coming year or which occupations will see the highest growth rates in the next 10 years can expect not only an attentive ear, but also generous financial contributions from governments and political parties.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to suspect that the ability of the social sciences to predict the future not only leaves much to be desired, but is also fundamentally limited. “Why did no one see this coming?” asked the British Queen during a visit to the London School of Economics in November 2008, referring to the global financial crisis. The researchers, as the representatives of their own interests, could have responded: because there was too little investment in research. But not even economists were that hard-nosed back then; the shock was probably too great.

A better answer to the Queen’s question would have been: some people did see it coming, because every event is always predicted by a few people if there are enough people making predictions about it.

MORE THAN ONE VALID EXPLANATION

That they could not have known the answer, however, is not due to a lack of research, but rather lies in the essence of the matter: in the nature of the social world and the kind of knowledge we are able, in the best case, to obtain about it. Meanwhile, word is now spreading that the social sciences are incapable of making “point predictions” — predictions about individual cases. However, point predictions are likely to be the only ones in which political leaders would be interested.

There are solid, logical reasons why the social sciences cannot say much about individual cases. Nor can this be changed, even with the most ingenious refinements to their scientific toolbox. Research on social processes will always involve fewer cases than the number of factors that could explain these cases, thus inevitably leading to more than one valid explanation for any given state of affairs. And every future state comes about as a unique result of a unique interplay of many factors — a one-of-a-kind situation for which there is no normal distribution, and whose distinctive features thus cannot be derived from general laws.

This can also be expressed in more pointed fashion: the essential historical authenticity of the social world is proven in the impossibility of imagining a future adjusted for coincidences. History becomes what it is through events that could also have failed to occur, and thus would have permitted a different history to be written. Without World War I and the Russian Revolution, which did not have to occur, the twentieth century would have taken a different course and modern...
The modern state and the democratic discourse are in many ways dependent on information about the state of society that is not readily available, the collection of which is often extremely complicated and requires extensive expert knowledge. Only a small portion of the data needed by political leaders is immediately evident from the state’s own administrative records: for example, the number of births and divorces, or number of recipients of social benefits of any kind, the average grades of high school graduates or the age structure of retirees. More often, however, the state is not allowed or is not able to collect key information itself – such as the number of newborns with a migration background, or the true extent of drug addiction.

Other factors that may seem to the layperson to be entirely unproblematic must be determined through complex estimation operations, that require constant refinement. These include not only the GNP, but also the population, which has not been counted directly since the last censuses in 1981 (German Democratic Republic) and 1987 (Federal Republic of Germany), but is now simply extrapolated using complicated, more or less satisfactory methods. The reason is that society resists being counted – a further example of the active role that the subject of social science plays for the discipline by responding to it.

Politically important issues such as per capita economic growth, birth and immigration rates or the unemployment rate are thus known with far less certainty than is normally assumed. In fact, there are instances where governments have tried for years to resolve problems, or have been held to account by voters for problems that, when the statistical data were later revised, turned out not really to have been problems after all.

The only way to make visible the decisions and interests that contribute to the official descriptions of social reality is an independent social science system. Only such a system is able to ensure the necessary pluralism through which solely politically problematic issues can be brought to light, or through which it can be shown how changes in social life bring about changes – for example, in the definition of joblessness, or in the classification of job applicants by employment offices – can raise or lower the unemployment rate.

The same holds true for the measurement of poverty and inequality, or in determining the performance level of students and schools or workers’ satisfaction with their working conditions. In short, without access to continuous, methodologically legitimate, critical information from society about society itself, the political discourse would be even more devoid of content than it often already is.

WOLFGANG STREECK, born in 1946, undertakes research in political economy and economic sociology, among other subject areas. From 1988, he taught at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and became a Fellow of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin in 1993. Streeck has also held visiting professorships at various international universities, before being appointed Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in 1995.

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Strengthening the pillars of democracy

Nino Abzianidze is a doctoral student at the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) Democracy at the University of Zurich. It is abundantly clear to her that there is still a long way to go before the key pillars of democracy are firmly in place in Georgia. Social sciences can make a contribution here.

Nino Abzianidze will never forget that Saturday evening. It was 13 March 2010, and the Georgian was spending the evening with friends in the country’s capital, Tbilisi. The phone rings – it’s her mother. “The Russians are attacking. The President is dead.” Two years after the war between Georgia and Russia, things are threatening to escalate again.

Nino Abzianidze and her friends switch on the television, and the Imedi TV channel, a pro-government broadcaster, shows images of Russian troops marching into the city. Within a short time, Tbilisi’s mobile phone network has virtually collapsed. Crowds of people run out onto the streets, confused and afraid.

Half an hour later, things become clear: the story was made up. Georgia’s President, Mikheil Saakashvili, is alive and there has been no invasion. A short time later, Imedi TV announces that the broadcast had been intended only to show what could happen if the President were to be murdered. However, many Georgians believe the aim was to create panic and to show clearly who the enemy is, namely the Russians.

Still a long way to go

For Nino Abzianidze, this example shows that Georgia still has a long way to go before the key pillars of democracy – such as media freedom – are firmly in place. “Some journalists in Georgia do not report on an independent basis. They do not fulfil their mission and allow themselves to be used as tools.”

Sacrificing the truth in times of peace is the wrong approach.

Journalists need better training – the representatives of the media need to be better informed of their rights and obligations. “This too is a task for the social sciences – in this case, media sciences.” Precisely in countries such as Georgia, which are undergoing a process of change, and which have no democratic tradition to fall back on, the social sciences make an important contribution to ensuring that this process succeeds. Transition countries undergo a lot of complex changes, “and these changes should be based on facts”.

Having started her doctoral studies at the University of Zurich in July 2011 under the auspices of the NCCR Democracy, over the next few years Nino Abzianidze will be taking an in-depth look at the role of the media in post-conflict situations. Her doctoral studies are being funded by the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN) and the NCCR Democracy. Her dissertation will deal with the role of the media in collective identity formation. What influence do the media have? How can they fuel or stem the conflict? To answer these questions, she will be taking a detailed look at the data from Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and analysing these data using the tools of social science.

A different career was planned

“It’s actually quite remarkable that I’ve become a social scientist,” says Nino Abzianidze, explaining that doctors predominate within her family, including her father. With a grin, she recounts that as a little girl, she liked to look through medical books and “marvel at the most awful pictures”. But one day she realised she could no longer stand the sight of blood, and knew that she wanted to study something other than medicine. To begin with, she opted for history, but then switched to the social sciences at the Centre for Social Sciences, Iavakhishvili Tbilisi State University. She has not regretted this decision – quite the contrary, in fact. “The further into the course I got, the more I realised that I had made the right choice.”

Return to Georgia

And what are her plans once she has got her doctorate? “After that, I want to go back to Georgia. I would like to help the country make progress.” In Georgia today, there is a tendency for researchers to concentrate on their own country when asking questions. However, this makes it difficult to gain international recognition. For this reason, it is important that Georgian scientists discuss matters with their colleagues abroad. Only in this way can they build up networks, which are vital for pursuing good research.

Building up these networks and establishing personal contacts takes a great deal of time and generates little success in the initial phase, since it is primarily a matter of finding out what topics others are conducting research on. Only in this way, however, can successful research cooperation be built up in a second step. “I hope that, through the contacts, knowledge and experience I gain during my doctoral studies, I will be able to contribute in some small way to the blossoming of the social sciences in Georgia.”
Social sciences and the culture of common sense

What is it that Georgia as a country is lacking? Many deficits are frequently mentioned: there is an obvious shortfall in security, insufficient economic development, gaps in democracy. There is also a significant shortage of capacity in the social sciences: supply trails well behind demand.

In fact, the ability of social scientists to save the world, or even a single country, is a myth that is part of the problem. The Soviet Union, the country whose legacy Georgia is still struggling to overcome, was built on precisely that myth: a social science theory paving the road to salvation. This mythologising doctrine prevented the emergence of any tradition of genuine social scientific scholarship. And as a result, Georgia had to start from scratch 20 years ago.

There are obvious problems that need solving. But do they correspond? Does the development and promotion of the social sciences have any place in the list of national priorities? No, the social sciences cannot save Georgia. I am sceptical that academics will be able to draw up a comprehensive program of national development that will enable policy-makers to make Georgia free, affluent, and democratic.

In the Georgian case – that of a country preoccupied with conflicts and survival – the new social science emerged in the form of a very technical, empirical research agenda commissioned by businesses, international organisations and NGOs. While Georgian society went through a series of profound transformations that were extremely painful, but intellectually challenging, there was almost nobody to study these transformations in a thorough and systematic way. The people who usually make up the intellectual class either went abroad or fled to the world of the NGOs.

Where societal transformations were discussed, this was mainly done within the existing paradigm of intellectualism that is another legacy of the Soviet era. Its features include a weakness for myths and conspiracy theories, and a readiness to jump to far-reaching conclusions based on untested personal observations. This often took place within the framework of the new institutional paradigm that I would refer to as ‘NGO intellectualism’: assessments of social processes had to be inextricably linked with defending the right kind of political agenda.

In recent years, after large-scale reforms initiated in the university system, social science started to develop as an academic discipline and build bridges to the international scholarly community. Lack of capacity is the main problem, but for the first time universities are actually doing something to counteract this. International programs linking Georgian universities to partners in global centres of excellence are indispensable for ensuring the success of this process.

CULTURE OF COMMON SENSE

How will the country benefit from the development and advancement of the social sciences? Certainly, this advancement may contribute to resolving specific problems in a number of different ways. But I would argue that the chief potential gain will be to do with a general change in mind-set. What Georgia as a country needs is a culture of common sense. Nothing would develop this culture better than fostering a habit of basing judgments on facts, rather than on ‘values’ or political agendas.

It is a widely recognised problem that Georgian politics is divorced from policy issues. There is virtually no political debate on how to solve the country’s problems – only a debate on who is morally worse, the government or the opposition. Social sciences by themselves cannot resolve this predicament. But the lack of basic data on Georgian society, as well as the absence of professional research and debate on the causes of and linkages between different problems, makes issue-based discussions close to impossible.

To take one example, issues of democratisation in Georgia are the subject of heated political debates, and legitimately so. On the other hand, President Mikheil Saakashvili has recently identified ‘modernisation’ as the country’s main goal, thus creating speculation as to whether this might imply abandoning the agenda of democratic reforms. Both of these concepts – democratisation and modernisation – are social science concepts that have a strong tradition of theorising and comparative research. By placing Georgian developments into comparative perspective, social scientists can make debates on these issues much more concrete and productive.

Social science should produce a mirror in which a country can look before working to improve itself. It should generate a critical mass of information and debate based on facts rather than vague observations and group agendas. In Georgia, we have not yet reached that point.

Ghia Nodia is a Professor of Politics, and Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He is also a founder of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD). He has published works on regional security, state-building and democratisation in the Caucasus. From February to December 2008, Ghia Nodia served as Georgia’s Minister of Education and Science.
Social sciences enable us to throw a spotlight on our own society and they question and deconstruct the mythologies that circulate and proliferate in any society.

Mr. Zedania, how long have the ‘free’ social sciences existed in Georgia?

Since the early 1990s. In the Soviet Union, the social sciences were virtually non-existent; they were supplanted by the Marxist ideology. As a result, not only is it difficult for Georgian social scientists to become part of the international scientific community, but as a further consequence they are not able to fulfil their societal function at all.

What is the situation like for the social sciences today?

Still not satisfactory. Developing and promoting young researchers in the long term is difficult, because we are not really able to offer interesting prospects, not even to promising young scholars. ‘Brain drain’ is a new problem that has sprung up since the ‘Wende’ and ‘Wende’ is responsible for coordinating Swiss-Georgian cooperation. Through European academics spending time in Georgia and Georgian academics spending time in Europe. For instance, there is a need to develop special university programmes.

Social research in Georgia continues to be hampered by the fact that a great deal of data is simply not accessible because it has never been collected. For instance, a couple of years ago we tried to conduct studies on the shift in values in Georgia. However, a retrospective examination enabling us to establish a baseline and place the present-day situation in its historical context is difficult because that data just doesn’t exist. We must do everything we can to ensure that the coming generation of social scientists in Georgia is better served in this respect.

What is the second important point?

The second point is closely connected to the first. An important function of the social sciences is to question and deconstruct social and cultural mythologies that quickly circulate and proliferate in any society if they are not actually combated. The period of great upheavals and the uncertainty that has prevailed in Georgia over the past 20 years offer a particularly fertile climate for such mythologies, which are often harmful for liberal values and the exercise of democracy. Here, the social sciences, with their robust basis in rational criteria, their critical view of societal phenomena, and the sophisticated analytical methods they employ, are particularly apt antidote.

What is the situation of the social sciences in Georgia?

A number of points can be mentioned. Firstly, the social sciences enable us to throw a spotlight on our own society and they question and deconstruct the mythologies that circulate and proliferate in any society. Another point is that they are a particularly apt antidote.
AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION PLUMMETED

However, the reform did not succeed. Tiny households generally became subsistence producers, rather than participants in the market economy. Agricultural production plummeted, and has continued to decline in recent years. New ideas are needed in order to increase productivity and to help rural villages survive.

The future depends on policies that are capable of pushing the situation in one of two possible directions. Turning subsistence-level farms into effective units of a rural economy requires the provision of public goods, services, subsidies and agricultural cooperation. If these policies are applied, the economic value attributed to small and medium plots of land may increase, while the owners of this land may gradually evolve into a middle class of an economically significant rural population. Alternatively, the government may support redistribution of land from the rural population to the major producers. In this case, major enterprises may take the lead in the agricultural economy.

Which of these policies would work better depends on many factors, including social capital, understood as the internal capacity of a community to sustain the cooperative activities of its members.

COLLECTIVE ACTION IS RARE

It may come as a surprise to many who have tended to think of a Soviet society as collectivist to know that cooperation, especially collective action, is a relatively rare phenomenon in Georgian villages. Rationally, it might be expected that households would benefit from cooperation by pooling their limited resources, but villagers exhibit considerable distrust towards any form of collective action requiring some form of resource aggregation. The reasons for this distrust are not yet fully understood.

The ASCN project ‘The Role of Social Capital in Rural Community Development in Georgia’ aims to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. As part of this project, we travelled to rural areas, talking to people, conducting interviews and running focus groups. We were looking for answers to the following questions: What kinds of cooperative activities can be observed? What are the patterns of such cooperative actions? How intensive, rigorous and persistent are these patterns?

We came to the conclusion that intensive social cooperation is not always equivalent to achieving social capital. ‘Horizontal’ cooperation between equals may exist without becoming ‘capital’ – that is, without social strength being converted into market success or political influence. The situation may be compared to an hourglass in which village inhabitants are at the bottom while the economic and political resources are in the upper part. Although they cooperate informally on the lower level, the village inhabitants are not able to convert this cooperation into capital which would bring them resources. The existence of the narrow bottleneck between the community and the system prevents the rural areas from developing further.

The next step is to conduct a survey amongst the inhabitants of 20 selected villages. This survey will enable project members to better understand the nature of the factors that may help to broaden the bottleneck, and to transform cooperation into capital.
Including Armenia in the international scientific community

Armenian scholars know little about the transition models already described by scientists in other countries. For them to understand Armenian society, there is a need to translate textbooks and modern studies and to include Armenia in the international scientific community.

ALEXANDER ISKANDARYAN

As in most post-Soviet countries, developing the social sciences in Armenia is a major challenge. Owing to the strong ideological bias of Soviet social science, a whole raft of scholarly disciplines, theories and narratives was banned during the Soviet era, holding back the development of the entire field (as compared, for example, to the natural sciences and mathematics). The mandatory, unquestioned domination of a simplistic form of Marxism led to a situation where university textbooks relied on out-of-date theories, cutting-edge publications were out of bounds, and even the classic texts in some fields were never translated.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, the sciences and technologies that had not been subject to ideological pressures, and were therefore better integrated into the international academic framework, were faced first and foremost with financial challenges. The small, impoverished post-Soviet countries, such as Armenia, could not afford the infrastructure or the equipment. As a result, scientists began to emigrate; brain drain is the main issue affecting mathematics and natural sciences in the former USSR, as these scholars are competitive by Western standards.

In the social sciences, brain drain from Armenia is negligible; on the whole, Western universities are not brimming with post-Soviet historians or political scientists, for the simple reason that the USSR did not produce any competitive scholars in these fields. In Armenia, professors of Marxism often teach political science and other social sciences; in most cases, they have not even had relevant vocational training, but have simply renamed their courses. As for research, the quantity has dropped sharply, and the quality is not only yet to improve but in some cases is in decline, even by Soviet standards, due to meagre financing and a lack of skilled teachers.

Of course, in the past 20 years, some students have received an education in the West, and some scholars have managed to learn modern methodologies and have got their hands on good quality publications, but this is still not enough to change the entire field. The points of growth are not numerous or powerful enough to create a new generation.

The special challenge of social sciences is that, whereas natural sciences or technology can be developed in the West, whereas natural sciences or technology can be developed in the West, where the funds and the infrastructures are in place, and the rest of the world can still face its own financial challenges, the social scientist needs to be in Armenia to study Armenian society, its development and its potential, and to propose solutions for the ongoing societal transition. Sociology, political science and anthropology are essential disciplines to enable a society to reflect on its priorities and identities; a perspective on history is also vital. For a country to enter the international arena, it needs first to understand what it is, and what it wants to be.

Instead, due to the current plight of the social sciences, the quality of public discourses has sunk to a preposterous low. On television or in any other mass medium in Armenia, it is virtually impossible to find a rational analytical debate on politics, history, migration or inter-ethnic relations. There is almost nobody whom journalists can approach for meaningful and informed comments. Most talking heads in these fields are either politicised actors, whose motives are political rather than scientific, or semi-educated ‘experts’ whose comments can at times sound quite surrealistic. It is too bad that the topics on which they pontificate are crucial for the country’s, and society’s, wellbeing: relations with neighbours, developing (or not developing) a European identity, defining the direction of reforms and introducing new practices in a wide variety of areas, from education to the media.

A good illustration is offered by the discourse surrounding Armenian-Turkish relations, which embraces a whole raft of concerns, all of them of primary importance to Armenian society. Yet the debates have become focused almost exclusively on centuries-old historical memories that are not necessarily even relevant to the specific issue being debated. Similarly, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which is important to the entire region, is still understood and discussed within a ‘desert island’ paradigm, as if it were a unique and completely isolated phenomenon. Clearly, knowledge of similar phenomena worldwide is lacking, as is the ability to apply this knowledge to one’s own society.

That said, some useful and professional studies are being conducted in Armenia. For instance, in the field of political science there is some research on ideological trends and local governance. Sociologists have studied a range of issues, from migration trends to societal trust. This is not enough for a breakthrough, but it is something.

At this stage, the key problem in, for example, political science is that Armenian scholars know little, or have insufficient depth of knowledge, about transition and development models and paradigms already studied and described by scholars in various other countries. To enable these Armenian scholars to understand their own society, there is a need to translate textbooks and up-to-date studies, to include Armenia in the international scholarly community, to engage in joint projects with partners abroad, to ensure the mobility of students and faculty, and much more. Poor progress in advancing the social sciences in Armenia will hinder the country’s political, economic and cultural development, reducing the efficiency of investments, including investments in science and technology.
Ms Sgier, what role do the social sciences play in our society?

They play a number of roles. First of all, they are there to identify problems that need to be addressed, including problems that have not yet necessarily been recognised as such by policy-makers. Secondly, their role is to analyse mechanisms, processes and structures and thus to understand how society functions. Incidentally, they can also open spaces for public debate and highlight possibilities for political governance. The third, and in my opinion most fundamental, role of the social sciences is that of critically scrutinising society and placing trends and developments in a critical perspective. Much like art and the media, the social sciences are, in a way, the ‘lungs’ of a society: in the best case, they contribute to a democratisation of society; in the worst case, they grind to a halt? Why does the process work in some being successful while others simply grind to a halt? Why did they end up in this position? What can be done about it?

The state also collects some data that can address such issues. Are the data from the social sciences more reliable than those collected by the state?

That really depends on the context. Western states also have institutions that collect high-quality data that comply with scientific criteria – in Switzerland, for instance, in the person of the Swiss Federal Statistics Office. But except for statistical offices, state institutions gather data (if they gather any at all) from a narrower, more pragmatic and more ‘interested’ perspective. On the whole, scientific data are subject to more rigorous quality criteria and control mechanisms, and are also much more thoroughly analysed.

One criticism sometimes levelled at the social sciences is that their results are not really surprising, and that the same conclusions could have been reached using just healthy common sense.

The benchmark for “good” social research is not how surprising, but how solid and relevant its results are. Findings based on data collected and analysed with scientific rigour are in many ways superior to common sense: more nuanced, precise and robust, and definitely harder to sweep under the carpet. Importantly, they are also more transparent and therefore often have neither the time nor the incentive to concern themselves with knowledge transfer to the wider public.

Are social scientists not more involved when it comes to making their work known to the wider public?

To some extent, it’s because maintaining a career in academia is not about transferring your knowledge or about being policy-relevant, but about publishing in highly specialised academic journals. Activities whose purpose is to make specialist knowledge accessible to a wider audience – such as teaching, involvement with associations, contact with the media – play a very subordinate role. In addition, for many academics the institutional workload has increased enormously in recent years, due to growing student numbers and an increasing bureaucratisation of universities. Researchers therefore often have neither the time nor the incentive to concern themselves with knowledge transfer.

Has the focus on numbers of papers published intensified?

Yes, in my area, yes. And the trend is increasing.

Another point of criticism that is used against social scientists is that they build too few bridges to the people who could benefit from this knowledge.

I think so, yes. The knowledge we gain is too rarely passed on beyond disciplinary bounda-

Social sciences are the lungs of society

Lea Sgier of the Central European University in Budapest on the role of the social sciences and why social scientists build too few bridges to people who could benefit from this knowledge.
The Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN) is a unique programme aimed at promoting the social sciences and humanities in the Southern Caucasus (primarily Georgia and Armenia). Its various activities foster the emergence of a new generation of talented scholars. “International programmes linking Georgian universities to partners in global centres of excellence are indispensable,” says Ghia Nodia, Professor of Politics and Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, Georgia. “What Georgia as a country needs is a culture of common sense. Nothing would breed this culture better than developing a habit of basing judgments on facts, rather than on ‘values’ or political agendas.”

This is exactly what the ASCN sets out to achieve. The programme focuses on the advancement of individuals who, thanks to their ASCN experience, become better integrated into international academic networks.

So far, the programme has financed 21 projects. In 2011, approximately 200 scholars benefited from the programme. The ASCN supports research projects, training courses, workshops, scholarships and conferences in Georgia, Armenia and Switzerland, and in this way enables all scholars involved to expand their international networks.

Cooperation
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