Making society a public matter

A cultural history of the
social sciences' politico-didactics

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The intellectual and cultural history of the social sciences has been a rapidly expanding and vital field of research in the last couple of decades: the empirical scope, the theoretical perspectives pursued, and the problems posed have proliferated. Although it is difficult to outline an overview of the far-reaching results generated by this prolific scholarship, some themes have been recurrently explored in many types of research and from a number of perspectives. The most obvious subject among these is probably the complex relationship between politics and the social sciences. Politics has been applied as an analytical concept in its extended meanings, and hence it is not just the influence of social science on processes of legislation and governing or on the ideology and rationale of political actors that has been studied, but also the political legitimacy and support of social knowledge production, as well as the political aspects of research priorities and methods in various disciplines. Taken together, such studies have shown how crucial this relationship is in order to understand the social sciences as a cultural phenomenon in general, and their function as sources of authority in modern political life in particular.

In this essay, I would like to distinguish another and as yet considerably less explored political aspect of social knowledge production—its explicit organization and deployment in order to shape public and civic life, or what I will call its politico-didactics. This concept delineates all efforts to make social-scientific concepts, ways of knowing, and representations a public matter; an ingrained part of how society is understood by the general public, and hence also of societal debate and

political subjectivities. Although it is often said that the social sciences influence how people understand themselves as social beings and citizens, there has been little research on the overt co-production of social knowledge and civic subjects or public discourse. For an example, in the most extensive handbook on the history of the social sciences—edited by Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross as part of *The Cambridge history of science*—a significant part is dedicated to the interaction between the social sciences and other cultural spheres, such as 'science, medicine, politics, bureaucracy, religion, and the professions' (2003: pt. 4), but there is no extended discussion of the explicit ambitions in social knowledge production to have an impact on modern public life or civic culture. And although such an exploration would be a vast topic in itself, one thing is certain: the aspiration to have such an impact is recurrent in the history of the social sciences throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whether it is manifested as a new faith, as in the case of Auguste Comte's societal analysis; or as a vision of democratic assemblies, as George Gallup described his opinion polling; or as a learning platform, like the Google-sponsored Gapminder project on global demographic issues.

As the empirical centre of my discussion, I will place a little-known and much less studied type of institution: what by 1900 had become known as social exhibitions or, more characteristically, 'social museums' in European and American cities. Only a few of these institutions have been given any significant attention in the literature—exceptions being Patrick Geddes's 'sociological laboratory' in Edinburgh and Otto Neurath's social and economic museum in Vienna—and only then as singular projects rather than as part of a general phenomenon. The stated purpose of such temporary or permanent venues was to address the general public, promoting sociological knowledge of and solutions to social problems. Although often quite different from one another in focus, scope, and scale, such museums were characterized by their displays on social issues related to demography, education, living standards, public health, industrial relations, and the like. These initiatives exhibited contemporary society and available means of reform by way of a large variety of media such as statistical diagrams, scale models, dioramas, films, staged environments, and photographs (Lundgren 2006). Some of these exhibition projects were linked together directly by collaborations or exemplary displays circulating in national and international networks, but most of these museums had a decidedly

tenuous organizational base, and hence few institutions lasted more than a couple of years. However, as a politico-didactic vision founded in social knowledge production, the social museum becomes identifiable as a distinct ambition at the large international exhibitions in Europe around 1880, and, after a peak in the inter-war era, new permanent museums were promoted up until the mid twentieth century, when this type of institution became obsolete (Lundgren 2012).

Although this sunken continent of local initiatives has left few surviving institutions and only scattered records behind, it is an example well suited to exploring how epistemic, political, and didactic considerations intersected when social knowledge in the public sphere was designed, promoted, and assessed during the democratic transition. The social museum is obviously another example of how the development of the social sciences was firmly rooted in the metropolises of the West, and hence a much more provincial tradition than its purported universalistic claims, but it is also a reminder of the crucial role of non-academic institutions, reform campaigns, and political capital that often gets lost in histories of social theory (Connell 2007). However, it should also be stressed, those involved in the making of social exhibits became much involved in an array of questions of considerable epistemological significance, for example, how to represent social phenomena, how to pursue social observation, and what type of self-reflexivity and societal understanding such activities brought about. In this way, these projects should not be thought secondary to some more serious social knowledge production, but rather as an integrated part of this broad landscape, and one where the epistemic characteristics and societal values of knowledge about society were constantly in play. Making society a matter for the general public was hence a project situated at the heart of modernity. These museums were designed to represent societal change not only as an intellectual pursuit, but also with the capacity to effectively engage the general public in the reformation of the very same society.

Hence, the social museum is an interesting historical case because it provides opportunities to move beyond an analysis of the politics of representation at work when social problems were defined and surveyed, or when overviews of broader dynamics of societal change were provided. These initiatives and the considerations so articulated make it possible to explore which problems these modes of seeing and knowing about society were considered to address in the first place,

and why such methods were considered suitable. In short, the social museum was a site for articulating and pursuing some of the perennial challenges in modern democratic societies: to make public issues accessible and graspable for the general public so they could make informed (for which read correct) individual choices as well as support the appropriate collective commitments. Sure enough, political choices and preferences underpinned both the very foundation of these sites as well as individual displays, but the rationale and didactic of putting them in place embodied ideals regarding the value of social knowledge production and of informed and rational political debate. The social museum was explicitly a learning platform and a campaign vehicle, and as a consequence it is possible to ask a number of questions regarding its politico-didactics. Who was supposed to study the displays at a social museum? What outcome was expected? What were the means to achieve this? What effects on society were projected?

In a series of case-studies, I have explored several of these questions in detail, and in this essay, my aim is to situate some of the most important analytical contexts of the social museum in the broader field of the social sciences' politico-didactics. Because, as much recent research on the history of the social sciences have shown, the dynamics of the wide landscape of social knowledge production from the late nineteenth century through to the Second World War cannot be understood by studying academic discourse alone, but has to include governmental agencies, municipal institutions, and private associations in matters of civic collaboration, welfare, and social reform. The social museum, both as a vision and a practical enterprise, cut through all these spheres of social knowledge production, and, moreover, often drew these actors into collaborations and exchanges where they made common cause to make these subjects into public matters. Hence, this particular site of interaction provides opportunities to discuss the premises and considerations that informed how producers and advocates of social knowledge discussed ways to change citizens' understanding of society and themselves. My discussion will focus in particular on the three themes; firstly, how claims regarding the capacity to provide realistic representations in general, and statistics in particular, were embodied in the visions of social museums; secondly, how a new didactics of self-knowledge took shape, that of providing opportunities for visitors to understand themselves within a broader framework of social analysis; and thirdly, how such initiatives both directly and indirectly were part of efforts to

establish new means of discussing common matters—public spheres, in other words.

This line of inquiry regarding the mediation of epistemic qualities, the capacity for fostering civic subjectivities, and the alleged potential as a foundation for rational discourse, is hence both different and pertinent to a range of discussions that have been pursued in historical studies of the social sciences in recent years. Sybilla Nikolow (2005) has shown the extent to which representations of the population as a scientific object were provided at popular venues in Germany during the first decades of the twentieth century. Janet Horne (2002) has demonstrated the importance of public manifestations when new welfare institutions were promoted and institutionalized in France in the late nineteenth century. Sarah Igo (2007) has explored the intensity in the interaction between scholars and the public when new survey methods in social analysis were made legitimate and were duly promoted in the US in the 1930s and 1940s. All of the above examples touch on politico-didactics—as an indirect aspect of the politics of representation in play, the ideological compromises in the institutionalization of welfare policies, or the realization of new research programmes—but they have not made it a specific topic of inquiry.

Social realism and the making of publics

Sociology on the one hand and realist or naturalist literature on the other were, as Wolf Lepenies has pointed out, methods of social description and societal understanding with strong affinities in late nineteenth-century Europe (Lepenies 1988). However, it should be noted that the kinship involved not only concerned the means of obtaining social knowledge, but also the means of representing and communicating such insights. Claims in the vocabulary of realism were recurrent in almost all forms of social knowledge production at the time, or, as it was often described, to portray social phenomena in 'their true proportions' and by the use of accounts that captured their 'nature'. Although not specific to the field of social knowledge, such considerations have not received such in-depth analysis here as in recent research in the history of the natural sciences or medicine (see, for example, Daston & Galison 2007). In the case of the social museum, the ambition of providing new ways of perceiving contemporary society and novel viewing positions on familiar phenomena was part and parcel of most projects.
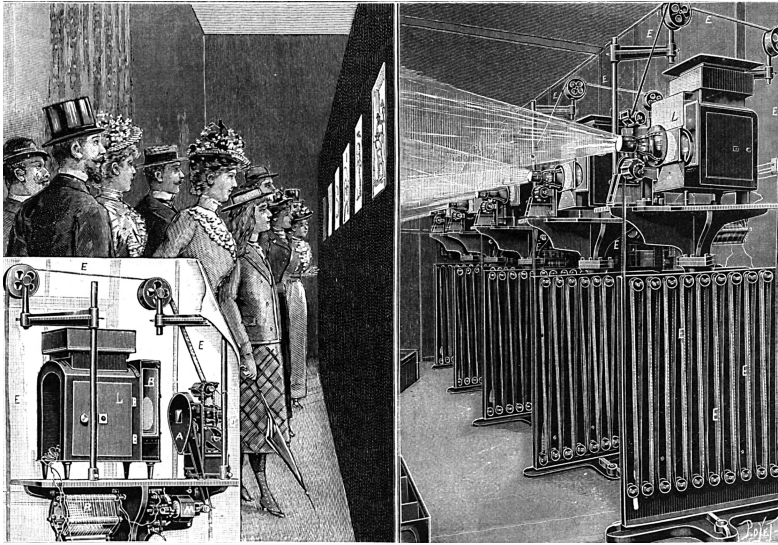
Figure 1. Seeing things in their true proportions: comparative screening of physical education initiatives. Display in the city of Paris' social exhibition at the World's Fair of 1900. From *La Nature: Revue des sciences et de leurs applications aux arts et à l'industrie*, vol 28: 2 (1900), p. 273.

In order to make a difference, social exhibits needed to provide some sort of media attraction, something that would stimulate curiosity and entice the general public to consider the issues on display, and—as, for example, Vanessa Schwartz (1998) has explored in the contemporary mediascape—new ways of providing and combining realistic effects was often the solution.

Attracting a public was both a delicate and important issue for social science in the late nineteenth century. It could involve considerations regarding scientific legitimacy, competition for resources, and the social status of this type of knowledge (Evans 2009). In the case of the social museum, all the projected effects of bringing the institution about hinged on the didactic qualities of the representations at hand and on the ways the visitors could engage and interact with the displays and associated activities such as lectures, guided tours, and experiments. Its capacity as a learning platform and campaign vehicle was thus dependent on representations of society that simultaneously could attract, engage and have an impact on the visitors. However, in these projects the boundary between approved and problematic ways of addressing the public

was to a significant degree defined by the ways emotive effects were achieved. Although many contemporary organizations in the area of social reform used live music, lantern images, and sentimental stories to achieve a moral awakening, such means repeatedly drew criticism from those involved in the making of social museums. The sober but stern force of seeing things as they really were, without any rhetorical embellishments or appeals to sentimental compassion, was the predominant moral quality they ascribed to achieving realistic modes of representation. Making use of media techniques such as the camera obscura, dioramas, or films borrowed from entertainment venues was not a problem as long as they underpinned the didactic rationale based on epistemic claims (Lundgren 2011a).

Especially important in this respect—both as a theoretical standard and as a practical undertaking when designing displays—were statistical representations of social phenomena. Although they may seem far-fetched and has yet received little scholarly attention, statistical ways of describing the world could entice popular fascination throughout the nineteenth century that, for example, publishers of popular print and entertainment entrepreneurs drew on at the turn of the century (Dalbello & Spoerri 2006, Ekström 2008). In social museums, statistics were present everywhere: and as stand-alone wall-charts on trends of remarkable phenomena such as illegitimate births, suicides, or crimes; as tables in printed pamphlets and books providing evidence of the extent of social problems; as graphic diagrams combining phenomena and hence also juxtaposing other representations such as models and photographs. Statistics served as a sort of universal medium in social knowledge production at the time, and thus also in social museums, tying all the various phenomena related to the heterogeneous social sphere together. In order to establish something as a social issue, it was imperative to be able, at least in principle, to provide statistical descriptions of the phenomena in question. Quantitative surveys were thus a foundation for the didactics of social museums, as it was possible to utilize them as a source of both epistemic trust, thoroughness of factual scope and detail, and of emotive restraint when describing contested aspects of contemporary society. A recurrent issue was thus how to best make use of this foundation as what I would call a politico-didactic resource.

It should be noted that the intense discussions in the late nineteenth century about how to design and utilize statistical representations were

not limited to the question of translating or popularizing existing social knowledge. Several commentators placed great faith in new representational techniques in statistics as an integrated part of the ongoing collection of data, for rational communication among social scientists, and for the purpose of generating theories. The most obvious example would be the wide-ranging and recurrent discussions of graphical statistical techniques. When in 1885 Alfred Marshall described the creative potential of diagrams as 'a great engine of statistical inquiry', he was just one of many to discuss the qualities of these techniques at length. Marshall's vision was also a vision of rationality for the organization of scientific work: 'The system of standard gauges and interchangeable parts has recently revolutionized many industries; and I think it may do a great good to the statistical industry'. The ambition of making social phenomena tangible by statistical representations could thus be both part of cutting-edge current research and the most far-reaching ambitions to address the general public in scientific matters (see Lundgren 2004: 273).

What aligned the prospects of graphic statistics as an effective research tool and as a supreme way of communicating difficult issues to the public was what was recognized as its capacity for immediate comparisons and unimpeded views. However, its alleged potential for popular communication was above all its capacity to express knowledge in a way that could be grasped by anyone, even those without any previous understanding of the issues. Graphic statistics were promoted as a sort of universal language for social issues, bridging differences in education, social background, and political convictions. In Britain it was a recurrent claim in social museum projects that graphical representations should be used so 'whoever walks may read'—that is, that complex issues would become comprehensible to almost anyone (see Lundgren 2011a: 41–3; Lundgren 2011b: 7). The recurrent analogies and comparisons between graphical statistics and other realistic visual media such as photography, and later moving pictures, underlined the immediacy and unambiguous character that these figures were credited with. Graphical statistics also became an ideal for social science in public. This was expressed, for example, when a French secretary of state commended the social exhibition at the 1900 world fair in Paris, the building itself embodying the 'sober' and 'clear' ways that the subjects were represented inside: 'instead of ornaments only maps, graphs and books' (see Lundgren 2006: 320).

The social museum could be described as a medium of its own where authoritative representations were brought together to provide an exceptional overview of contemporary society.

The didactics of self-knowledge

The vision of stimulating a change of perspective and new abstract thoughts was very much connected to the new representations that were on offer in social exhibitions. When Patrick Geddes named his social museum in Edinburgh 'the Outlook Tower' this was literally the case; it was housed in a tower that had been added to an old city tenement, and the visitor passed through a series of observatory vantage points, but his museum also incorporated new graphical representation techniques that in his words, like the museum as a whole, were 'thinking machines'. Geddes' ambition was to provide an 'education of the eye' for those engaging with his representations, to get past the habitual modes of observation in order to really see things (Lundgren 2011a). Another example of this connection would be when Otto Neurath, two decades later in Vienna, developed his universal visual language in order to realize his programme of 'picture education' through statistical representations. Neurath's epistemological, sociological, and economic writings are well known, but he dedicated much of his time to this particular grand didactic project. His goal was to stimulate the interest and attention of the general public in an ongoing analysis of society, and the project was founded on describing very material, local circumstances in standardized and generalized ways by the means of visual statistics (Vossoughian 2008). It was hoped that visual representations in general and graphical statistics in particular would entice the visitor to a social museum to see, think, and become engaged in an analysis of society.

The didactics of social museums were not only to bring unfamiliar phenomena into view, but also to have the capacity to change the visitors' conceptions of the familiar: their ideas about everyday life. The social exhibitions were of course part of a larger effort at the time to organize and systematically display knowledge. When as an early forerunner Frederic Le Play placed the exhibition 'the history of work' at the very centre of the Paris World's Fair in 1867, the objects on display were at the same time part of national exhibitions to allow systematic comparisons between countries. The huge variety and the sheer number of things displayed at social exhibitions might seem like an arbitrary

Figure 2. Reading statistics and studying reform rationales. Schoolgirls visiting the social museum in Stockholm, *c* 1914. Photo in the archive of Stockholm city museum, photographer unknown.

assortment of bric-a-brac, but the undertaking not only had a systematic ambition as such, it was also combined with the pedagogical idea of object lessons. To be able to see, handle, and combine representations of social phenomena in these exhibitions was often summed up in the classical motto, *Know thyself*, not only understood as the necessity to pursue introspection, but also an exhortation to ponder the broader societal relations and development that had bearing on one's life.

In order simultaneously to understand society and know oneself, it was necessary to adapt a framework where individual traits and circumstances became aspects of broader phenomena. The didactics of social museums thus encouraged shifting frames of reference for everyone where, for example, income, family size, health, and innumerable other aspects could be seen in the light of statistical aggregates. What was offered through the displays was a sort of experimental subject position, where it was possible to step in and out of frames of reference based on authoritative social knowledge. In some cases, exhibits also encouraged self-assessment as an ongoing practice of responsible civic selfhood. This was the case, for example, when Francis Galton established an anthropometric laboratory at the International Health Exhibition in London 1884. Visitors had to take an active part both in order to contribute with data to his ongoing scientific work, and

to learn how to understand themselves in the light of this research in order to effectively adjust their ideas and choices when it came to family matters (Lundgren 2011b). In this very early case of popular eugenics, the social categories offered to visitors so that they could understand society and themselves in a more informed way were explicitly a work in progress, where the ideal was to make the acquired knowledge the foundation for changes to the selfsame phenomena.

This specific didactic of the social exhibition—its mode of involving publics—separated it from many other museum venues at the turn of the last century. In order to engage visitors in the subjects on display, and ultimately to make them consider themselves as part of the phenomena represented, it was necessary to offer them opportunities to become explicitly aware of themselves as inquiring subjects. This self-reflexive mode of inquiry was a perfect fit with the liberal character of many meliorist social movements in the late nineteenth century. Whether the objective was sanitary reform, temperance, or home ownership, the rationale was to enlist individuals and make them instruments of the reform's objective. In some cases the objective was primarily to influence public opinion or to build political pressure on certain topics by encouraging publicity, but in such instances social museums still addressed the visitors in the same manner, encouraging them as representatives of the general public to see the problems with their own eyes.

In this manner, social museums took the authority and trust in certain modes of representing and investigating society and put them to use for many different objectives. What united all of these projects was that they were all based on a manifest belief in these modes of inquiry. Social knowledge was not only useful raw material to back a political agenda, but a way of dealing with collective issues by involving as many people as possible. The optimism about the possibilities to bring about informed, engaged, and responsible publics was significant.

The public spheres of the social sciences

Already in the 1830s, it is possible to find claims that publicly available surveys of collective problems would foster responsibility and political moderation (Lundgren 2003). Similarly, the vital aspect of social knowledge was repeatedly invoked in the early twentieth century. It was one aspect of Lippmann's and Dewey's discussions in the 1920s about the

possibility of the polity, faced by ever more complex societies, to main-
tain a sufficiently informed capacity to form independent judgements.
For those taking Dewey's more optimistic position, it seemed that new
means of bringing society into public view were badly needed. To some
progressive reformists such as Alva Myrdal, the social museum was the
best available means to close this knowledge gap, and it was hailed as a
vehicle for bringing about rational, and hence productive, discussions
of ongoing societal development (Lundgren 2012).

However, in contrast to much of the discussion about the history of
the public sphere in the singular, it should be noted that the attempts to
establish social museums were understood to be more complex under-
takings than a straightforward distribution of facts to an audience. The
vision of a rational and informed debate was dependent on more than
authoritative knowledge statements. These projects organized venues
where a careful consideration of complex matters ideally meant engag-
ing with various ways of describing the issue at hand. Many of these
initiatives also led to discussions and innovations in how visitors might
gain an understanding of how the knowledge had been brought about,
and how new knowledge could be pursued. Furthermore, the publics at
these venues were explicitly discussed and addressed as new collective
bodies with societal significance. Though the specific politics of the
various initiatives depended on local circumstances, these combined
politico-didactic characteristics made them a significant episode in the
endeavour to make society a public matter during modernization. As
Bruno Latour and others have argued, assembling actual publics has
been an important part of making things a public concern through-
out the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the role these polities
have been assigned is an essential quality in the various 'atmospheres
of democracy' (Latour & Weibel 2005).

The social museum has served in this essay as an example of how the
social sciences have been part of the politico-didactic projects of the
twentieth century. The ambition to bring about a new type of public
reason and civic discourse proved an elusive goal, and it could safely be
claimed that these short-lived initiatives did not meet the expectations
that brought them about. However, as a means of grasping the specific
role of social science in the public spheres of modern societies and in
the moulding of civic subjectivities, the social museum as a phenom-
enon brings several interesting aspects to our attention. It reminds us
that it is possible to look for didactic considerations among seemingly

Figure 3. Making a public sphere. Statistical exhibits in the municipal parade by the employees of the city of New York, May 17, 1913. News image reproduced in Brinton, *Graphical methods* (1914), p. 343.

technical or mundane aspects of social knowledge production. New ways of representing society have surprisingly often been considered through the lens of achieving new publics and new civic selves. Very little research has been pursued in this area, and the significance of categories and concepts from the social sciences in the vocabularies of modern life suggests that there is much interesting work to be done.

The tradition of making social science knowledge public has attracted more attention in recent years. Craig Calhoun has insisted that this strong legacy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will need to inform current priorities at the universities if the social sciences are to develop and become not just more relevant in society, but of higher intellectual quality. This call for a return to the 'roots' of social knowledge production convincingly argues that such efforts could not understand the task as informing the general public about results, but rather as a revitalized public engagement throughout the research process (Calhoun 2008). It is easy to sympathise with his vision, and his supporting arguments are convincing. However, it should be noted

that the ways social knowledge production are used to constitute public matters would not be external to such efforts. There is, as I have argued here, a rich tradition of politico-didactics in the social sciences to revisit, but it is not possible to see it merely as a matter of social scientists working in the service of, or 'for', public knowledge in an unspecified manner. What Sheila Jasanoff (2004) has described as the co-production of science and social order in the natural sciences is as true—maybe even more so—for the social sciences.