

Social Science Research: A Critical Reappraisal

Hasan Mahmud*

Abstract

social researchers' claim of representing reality has been contested from post-structuralist point of view that reality cannot be known through language. For language cannot contain and thus reflect reality. Rather it mediates power in the hands of the specialists. Furthermore, researchers themselves define the problem and formulate policies. Therefore, the subjects do not have voice. Hence one side of the reality always remains out of the academic discourse.

1

It is a long standing, if not the only, concern of the social scientists to represent reality through the knowledge acquired by adopting scientific methods of investigation. Scientists of various discipline and tradition deploy their intellectual expertise and respective methods of investigation to this endeavor. However, there is a great disparity among the scholars on which method suits best in grasping the essence of reality. Yet there are scholars who contend that the social research methods are not representing reality, rather they are creating what may be termed '*virtual reality*' and thus mediating power in the hands of the professional expertise. The social researchers use to claim their efforts of knowledge production as scientific or systematic that allow them to get into the heart of reality, to comprehend the truth regarding the issue in question. In practice, such a claim leads them to consider the knowledge they develop as the only knowledge to be accredited and hence formulate policies to address the problems basing on that knowledge. They often ignore the need to revise or reformulate the policies in the belief that such policies would do as they are stimulated by true knowledge. As a result, the policies fail and the problem remains unresolved.

2

The problem to be addressed, its causes, consequences, and any other aspect related to it get accreditation as true knowledge or are thought of representing the reality by virtue of being scientific. That is, disembodied researchers, who adhere to the standards of scientific enquiry and thus come to represent reality, have produced such knowledges. Michel Foucault,

* Ph.D Student, University of California, Los Angeles, (UCLA), USA.

drawing on poststructuralism, argues that we cannot know reality. For our knowledge comes through language, which cannot contain, and thus reflect, reality. Language can grasp only the surface level of discursive statement. While we can be able to interpret the surface meanings of discursive practices, and thus develop a contingent knowledge, it is not directly accessible, mainly because it is not knowledge at all in everyday sense of the world. This is because *the system of rules which governs the production, operation and regulation of discursive statements mediates power, or more precisely a 'will to power': not the will of one particular individual or group but a generalized will to create the possibilities to be 'able to speak the truth'* (Hacking 1986: 34-35). Foucault uses the term 'power/knowledge' to refer to this generalized will to power. He argues that power/knowledge is productive of new ways of saying plausible things about its objects upon which it operates. Hence, appear the scientific disciplines (discourses) or 'regimes of truth' in Foucault's term. From this perspective, societies are said to be structured by dominant regimes of truth. These regimes are characterized by the following:

- a. Specific rules are authorized for generating and validating knowledge.
- b. Specific practices of knowledge production are institutionalized.
- c. Specific agents with socially validated 'expertise' are given institutional authority, and
- d. Specific social practices are accorded public legitimacy by virtue of their connection to dominant knowledge; for example, the link of science and medicine or psychiatry and therapeutic practices. (Seidman 1994).

Seidman (1994) further argues that every regime of truth produces subjugated or subordinate, marginalized knowledges. These knowledges and practices of knowledge production are devalued and suppressed but remain historically effective. Hence, knowledge is always implicated in power both-

1. in its role of suppressing some knowledges, their producers, and the life world from which they issue, and
2. in its role of being socially productive; for example, producing identities, shaping institutional practices, and generating norms and normalizing standard.

Foucault deciphered collusion between this systematic schema of knowledge production and the making of a disciplinary system of social control (Foucault 1980). This disciplinary order, as he elaborated, operates by creating and managing subjugated populations and their knowledge. Such a process of developing social hierarchies, however, foments the emergence of new types of social identities and modes of political mobilization. The consistently flourishing of marginalized knowledge, which Foucault observed in the surfacing of newer voices connected to the revolt from below (e.g., prisoners, homosexuals, women, immigrants, de-colonized people), exposes the '*progress of reason and science as a political process*' (Seidman, 1994).

3

'The challenge to social scientists for a redefinition of the basic problem has been raised in terms of the 'colonial analogy'. It has been argued that the relationship between the researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research and to some extent, the quality of interaction between him and his subjects(Lander 1971:vii).

35 years ago, Joyce Lander addressed an essential shortcoming of the social research methods and pointed to the fact that knowledge production the researchers could be thought necessarily as a matter of power game where the subjects were relegated to the subjugated position of 'other'. Here the professionals with proven expertise apply power to create narratives about their subjects that get accreditation as knowledge. The coherent professional voice sounds genuine against the noisy dialect of the 'other.' The deferential commitment of the researcher/writer to the scientific standards domesticates the anger of the 'other'.

How social researchers create the 'other'? In response to this question, Fine elaborates her study on high school dropouts (Fine 1991). She writes: "I (*white, academic, elite women*) represent the words and voice of African-American and Latin working class and poor adolescents who have dropped out of high school, in texts, in court, and in public policy debates and it becomes scholarship. Some even find it compelling. My raced and classed translation grants authority to their 'native' and 'unarticulated' narratives. My race and class are coded as 'good science'. The power of my translation comes far more from my whiteness, middleclass-ness and education than from the stories I tell" (Fine, 1991).

Such translation colludes with a structure of domination as Foucault saw it. Edward W. Said in his seminal work 'Orientalism' (1978) sketched this structure of domination to some detail. He wrote:

'Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world ... the orient is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks' (p-40).

What becomes apparent from Said's illustration is that by the grace of their dominating position social researchers be able to construct an identity of their subject in such a way that confirms the researchers' supremacy. The researcher/subject relation assumes a form in which the subjects always need to be represented by the researcher, as if they cannot represent themselves of their own. Thus Said contends: "*Since the Orientals cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented by others who know more about Islam than*

Islam Knows about itself ... it is quite different than pronouncing it as immutable law that outsiders ipso facto have a better sense of you as insider than you do about yourself. Note that there is no question of an exchange between Islam's views and an outsider's: no dialogue, no discussion, no mutual recognition. There is a flat assertion of quality, which the western policy maker, and his faithful servant, possesses by virtue of his being Western, White, Non-Muslim" [1978:97].

As the East was politically inferior to the West, it was in need of corrective study by the West by the West. Hence the Orient was viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison and the illustrated manual. *Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for study, scrutiny, judgment, discipline or governing* (Said 1978).

The way of depicting the Orient as 'Other' can be elaborated in the analysis of binary oppositions in language that have been productive of linguistic and social hierarchies. For example, the term 'man' is defined in terms of what 'men' are not- 'women'. The very meaning of 'man' essentially requires exclusion of the 'feminine' and vice versa. Yet the two terms are asymmetrically balanced in terms of power. The first term man is superior. For example, 'man' might be associated with reason, leadership, the public sphere, control and authority. From such a post structuralist point of view, the West and the Orient can be seen as standing on binary opposition. "*The Oriental is irrational, deprived, childlike, 'different': thus the Western is rational, virtuous, mature, normal*" (Said 1978: 40).

From Said's analysis of Orientalism, it becomes apparent how the Western scholarship, during the 18th centuries, successfully created the scientific discourse of modernity that constructs the Orient as 'other'. Following this perspective, postmodern writers attempt to criticize the role of science in general and human sciences in particular in subjugating and marginalizing different populations.

In fact, science functions as the boundary marker in the discourse of modernity. It determines what ideas about the social world count as knowledge and therefore deserve public authority. Simultaneously, it relegates all that is recognized as non-scientific in a subordinate epistemic and social status. Such subjugated or degraded knowledge is labeled as ideology, opinion, tradition, myth, religion, philosophy, literature and theories. In a word, '*Science confers authority and legitimacy on a discourse, its producers, and the social values and ideals of the discourse. Science is power – the power not only to silence or marginalize all non-scientific talk but also to contribute to the making of selves and social worlds, as Foucault has argued in his genealogies and feminists in their political critiques of science*' (Seidman 1994:29).

The writers, critical to scientific discourse, acknowledge that the 'self' and 'other' reside on opposite sides of the same door. 'Home' and the 'other world' are successfully split. The former codes comfort, whereas the latter flags danger. Othering helps us deny the danger that loiters inside our homes. Othering keeps us away from seeing the comforts that linger outside. Thus, they argue, social research contributes to the making of a partial reality that enables the researchers to dominate the academic arena as the specialists, the sole agents of true knowledge upon which policies to be formulated. Yet a significant portion of reality, perhaps the most important one that the subjects construct of their own, remains out of consideration in the name of non-scientific, inarticulate, and native. Such a practice in the social sciences facilitates the construction of *hyperreality*² instead of representing the reality.

Reference:

1. Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Tr. Sheila Faria Glaser. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan). Originally published in French by Editions Galilee, 1981.
2. Fine, M. 1991. *Framing Dropouts* (Albany: State University of New York).
3. Foucault, M. 1980. "Two Lectures" in Gordon, C. (Ed), *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Readings 1972-77* (Brighton: Harvester).
4. Hacking, I. 1986. 'The Archaeology of Foucault' in D.C. Hoy (Ed) *Foucault: a Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell).
5. Lander, J. 1971. *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, Garden City (New York: Doubleday).
6. Said, E.W.1978. *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon).
7. Seidman, S. 1994. *The Postmodern Turn*. (New York: Cambridge University Press).

² Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality" refers to the virtual or unreal nature of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption. Baudrillard believes, we live in a world dominated by simulated experience and feelings, and have lost the capacity to comprehend reality as it really exists. We only experience prepared realities-- edited war footage, meaningless acts of terrorism, the destruction of cultural values and the substitution of "referendum." In Baudrillard's words, "*The very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. . . The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is the hyperreal... which is entirely in simulation*"(1994). For example, a plastic Christmas tree that looks better than a real Christmas tree ever could, well manicured garden (nature as hyperreal), or pornography ("sexier than sex itself").