

Responses

The Joys and Hazards of Synergic Research, Or Taking the Sin out of Synergy. Rebuttal of David Lempert's critique of the Multipath Forecasting Project (MFP)

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It has now become a cliché to claim that the current social and environmental problems and the specter of terrestrial Armageddon can only be solved via a truly interdisciplinary research. The problem is that the dream of a 'romance' between disciplines remains a largely Platonic project, adorning reports and annual plans, and strongly resisted on the ground. David Lempert's friendly critique of the draft of our synergy project "A History of Possible Futures" is a case in point. Though well-intentioned, it ends up having something of the impact of 'friendly fire'. For although the author is, in principle, well-disposed to a collaboration of (some) disciplines to better understand—as well as predict—aspects of human history and behaviour, the general thrust of his critique reveals the following professional deformations of the social scientist in search of an interdisciplinary Shangri La:

Hypertrophic Erudition. I.e. flooding one's critique with a deluge of references to publications (Lempert's own work prominent among them), which we have allegedly neglected to mention in our draft description. Let us, then, state the following by way of explanation: a) if we have omitted some relevant publications, we have not necessarily done so out of ignorance (though at the initial stage, some such ignorance is inevitable!); on the contrary, we wanted to avoid what David Sloan Wilson calls a "combinatorial paralysis" (i.e. celebrating complexity without providing a way to navigate the way out of complexity); b) to write an engaging project with a cogent narrative often involves avoiding the temptation to clutter up the argument with a dense tangle of references and thus to ensure that its inner logic and *telos* are not lost from view.

Disciplinary territoriality. Although David Lempert is by his own account a fan—even a connoisseur—of interdisciplinary research, he criticizes the MPF project for

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Citation: Nina Witoszek and Alte Midttun. 2018. The Joys and Hazards of Synergic Research, Or Taking the Sin out of Synergy. Rebuttal of David Lempert's critique of the Multipath Forecasting Project (MFP). *Clodynamics* 9: 162–5.

"romancing" both the social sciences and the humanities, and not taking on board social science theory proper—as if there was a *unitary, proper, and uncontested* social science theory! The fact of the matter is that there is a whole bundle of contradictory perspectives and disputed paradigms, both across and within social science disciplines. In economics, the spectrum ranges from Friedman's and the Chicago School's praise of minimally regulated markets, to Marxist and neo-Marxist economics arguing for planned economy solutions, not to mention various Neo-Keynesian schools take up middle ground positions.

In addition, Schumpeterian perspectives on dynamic innovation contradict basic steady state economics. In sociology, there are perspectives on crisis and transformation ranging from Durkheimian *anomie* theory, to Weberian benchmarks for governance quality, and on to Parsonian systems theories with rather unclear predictive value. Taking a functionalist perspective, Stichcombe complements this diversity by emphasizing functional equivalence and claiming that it makes a hard job to nail down any empirical measurement. A basic objective of MPF is to break with the tradition of covert mono-disciplinary groupthink and to challenge the tendency of (mostly male) academics to implicitly obey the territorial imperative in defense of their own approach to a contested area or in upholding the academic purity of their work.

Scientific Hubris. linked to Lempert's highfalutin perceptions of the social science as 'scientific' (i.e. empirical and evidence-based) and to discounting the role of qualitative and interpretative research—existentialist anthropology and psychology (e.g. Fromm), history (including economic history à la Weber), and semiotics—as "subjective", impressionistic, and even "new agey". We are truly puzzled by his glorification of Malinowski's *Scientific History of Culture* as exemplary "science": it has been criticized extensively for its racist bias, not to mention serious methodological errors! Though Lempert is undoubtedly an exemplary polymath, he represents the hubris of many anthropologists who have aspired to forge a 'scientific', systemic and evidence-based social science. Only few of them (the greatest being Clifford Geertz) have had the courage to admit that anthropologists are at bottom *story-tellers*, albeit empirically oriented ones, often falling into the trap of "designer tribalism".¹

Anti-Humanist Bias. We disagree with Lempert's charge that mixing case studies and semiotics on the one hand, and quantitative analysis on the other, is inappropriate and problematic in addressing the dynamics of social crisis and resilience. Firstly, there is a permanent need for idiographic fine-grained, case-based analysis in the human sciences to counterbalance the nomothetic formulation of abstract theories. The world changes, technology changes, and our information changes—which means that there is an ongoing need for more

¹ See e.g. Sandall 2011.

complex ways of understanding this change and test out our generalizations about basic patterns in behaviour and processes. The Malthusian hypothesis, which Lempert is so fond of, is a good case in point. Malthus critically neglected technological innovation and therefore arrived at his well-known, and untenable, catastrophe theory.

We hold that the need for revisiting pertinent case studies for generating novel knowledge will never end. Witness Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation, where novel approaches from outside mainstream technology-trajectories may at first sight seem inferior and problematic, but may eventually disrupt mainstream technology trajectories, and replace them. This being said, our choice of a combination of Jurij Lotman and Umberto Eco's semiotics as our main humanist theory and method is not without a reason: very much as in the case of the [Seshat Project](#), the main aim of Tartu semiotics is to search for semiotic regularities, rhythms and repetitions in cultural history of past societies: their narratives, ritual patterns, memes, and other symbolic forms transmitted from generation to generation. Indeed, few humanist methodologies are so empirical in scope and so immune to the perils of subjectivity!

Thus, in a semiotic reading the Romans 'declined' and 'fell' not just because of demography or economic crisis, but because they lost some of their cultural texts which ensured cultural homogeneity and continuity, a sense of historical rootedness and futural narrative, and communal identity. Similarly, the Renaissance breakthrough and scientific revolution that went with it became possible not just because of new political and economic constellations, but because of the diffusion of novel stories about *human autonomy* and the virtue of free inquiry. Historical semiotics and existentialist anthropology provide interpretive insights that are often missing from big data, which is why they are referred to in our project as constituting 'thick data', an equivalent of 'thick description' in anthropology. 'Thick data' is used by anthropologists such as John Ryle and Clifford Geertz for the detailed field notes on ritual and social behaviour which are used as the basis for establishing universal patterns in human ethology. In our project, we aim at supplying the big data with the analysis of stories that have played a defining role in the life of societies both as signifiers of their identities and as drivers of pivotal sentiments (e.g. fear, sense of unfairness, humiliation, pride, fulfilment).

Two more brief points, which could be expanded on.

Subjective Bias About Subjectivity. Lempert misfires on the role of subjective feelings in the social sciences: see latest academic bestsellers written by the Nobel Prize winners Akerlof and Shiller on the underestimated role of emotions in financial markets.

Sloppy Reading. We are not sure if Lempert read carefully our project proposal: he claims that we do not mention testable, theory-driven hypotheses—a centerpiece of our approach, in fact!

References

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