

# Why do we need a social imagination?

*This year has for many brought into sharp focus the social basis of almost all major global challenges, be it the climate crisis, racial justice, or COVID-19. Reflecting on his career in and around the social sciences, **Ziyad Marar**, outlines why a social imagination is now more important than ever, and puts forward 10 ways in which social insights are central to resolving the challenges we currently face.*

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I've spent my adult life in and around social science. Academically through studying psychology and linguistics (alongside philosophy), professionally through working at SAGE for over 30 years and personally through an abiding amateur interest in various fields sometimes expressed in [my own writing](#) of books or articles.

In light of [my recent election](#) as a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. I've been reflecting on what social science has meant to me, and why my interest continues to this day.

These reflections are a quite personal take. They are not meant to be a 'defence of social science' or a comprehensive review of its impact in various domains, though when people who aren't familiar with social science ask me what the point of it is; I find myself responding in this kind of vein. It's a personal view on why I think a social science imagination can benefit us as individuals and improve society more generally, especially at a time of such upheaval and reconfiguration.

The starting point for me is in human psychology, the subject of my undergraduate degree. In my first week in October 1985 as a fresher at Exeter University, I met Steve Reicher, who was assigned as my first-year tutor. Steve was a 'new blood' lecturer at the time who had a year earlier published what was to become a seminal article analysing the [St Paul's riots in Bristol in April 1980](#). Through my encounters and discussions with Steve and other psychologists in the department, I learned about certain features of human nature. While I didn't go quite as far as Steve, who would say 'the nature of human nature is its capacity to transcend itself', and while the very idea of human nature is, I realise, contested and felt confusing to me initially, I started to learn how profoundly social that nature was.

While this may sound obvious to many – we are social animals who cooperate and learn from each other, of course – I nevertheless find it hard to see myself that way consistently. And I've learned that it's not just me. While social science shows how our natures are deeply social it also explains why we don't always see this fact that well. When not looking through a social science lens we (in the West at least) tend to see ourselves and our place in the world as more individual than that, like fish swimming around unaware of the environment in which they are suspended.

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It's not that the idea of the individual is a myth. Rather it is one of many identities, all shaped by historical and cultural forces, which tends in our daily lives to be overly emphasised. We see the figure more easily than the ground along which she walks. For instance, what's known as the 'fundamental attribution error' leads me to look at someone's behaviour and explain it too quickly in terms of their imagined individual characteristics and ignore the context. So if someone cuts me up in traffic I more easily think 'selfish!' rather than 'maybe there's an emergency'.



A key value of social science, it seems to me, is *to counter-balance that self-image*, to help us see the ground as well as we see the figure. We know when it comes to physical health that what we want and what is good for us are not always aligned. Well so it is for the social health of this social animal. Our interests, it seems to me, are best served by a more balanced understanding of human circumstances and contexts, but for all sorts of reasons evolutionists like to explore, we don't do this as fully as we might. The tendency mentioned above for instance, to see the individual more easily than her circumstances, has deep consequences for the chances of human flourishing – for our attitudes toward each other – if left unchecked.

And this point, the need to see more context, can be extended in various ways. Here are 10 examples of tendencies we have which a social science imagination can and should help us to counter-balance, each of which have moral or political implications for how to organise ourselves and society better. This is not to say that each tendency is a problem in itself, or that we can't reverse it under certain conditions, it's that a social science imagination is useful in helping us do just that. I've put these 10 into three broad buckets:

Those tendencies which assume we have more agency, more control over our circumstances, than we do, e.g.:

- **Judgement over luck.** It's easier, thanks to the 'just-world hypothesis' and even the idea of meritocracy to assume people have more responsibility for their outcomes than they generally have. So people who end up worse off in life can be blamed for their individual failure to measure up.
- **Cure over prevention.** It's easier to say 'lock 'em up' and harder to be tough on the causes of crime. The same goes for health interventions. We will typically pay more for treatment rather than preventative measures.
- **The conscious over the unconscious.** It's easier to focus on explicit thoughts and feelings, and to assume we are rational and objective in our judgments while ignoring the less obvious underlying tendencies such as revealed by studies of unconscious bias.

Then there are those which favour the near over the far, whether in terms of time, space or social categories, such as:

- **Short term over long term.** It's easier to spend now than to save for a pension. Similarly, we can underrate the significance of climate change for future generations.
- **The near at hand over the far away.** It's easier to care about the incidence of COVID-19 in our own locale rather than further afield. There's even evidence of a 'propinquity effect' which describes how we find people and things more appealing merely by being physically closer to us.
- **Us over Them.** What's called 'ingroup favouritism' makes it easier to sympathise with people 'like me' than the members of an outgroup. The recent surge in political polarisation, from Brexit to the recent US election, bears on this tendency.

We have tendencies to oversimplify, to prefer the status quo and then to generalise, such as when we favour

- **The dominant over the marginalised.** It's easier to see a tall, white middle class man as an authority figure than almost anybody else!
- **The vivid example over statistical data.** It's easier to fear terrorism and plane crashes than driving cars. And remember the line often attributed to Stalin, that a single death is a tragedy, while a million deaths are a mere statistic.
- **Choosing the status quo over alternative explanations.** It's easier to say 'that's just how things are', than this is how they got this way and could be different. Much of what feels immutable is in fact socially constructed.
- **The simple over the complex.** It's easier to skewer politicians on the journalistic jab of 'answer the question yes or no', than to accept a more nuanced response. Many social problems are known as 'wicked' and don't always have right or wrong answers, though hopefully better or worse ones.

It's a simple list which reveals my starting point in psychology, and others (from sociology, anthropology, political science etc) would choose different examples I'm sure. But, I hope it shows that tending to think people have more freedom and agency than they do, or tending to favour the near over the far, or to see the social world as fixed rather than constructed comes easily to us, while hampering the possibilities of human progress in many ways.

A social science imagination helps us put a thumb on the scales to counter-balance those tendencies. This offers possibilities to recalibrate society to better suit our social natures than an individualistic essentialising view will be inclined to do. Meanwhile politicians, media outlets, and more generally people with power – and wanting to hold on to it – exploit these tendencies; and social science analyses that, too.

Social science has a hard time breaking through because it tends not to offer up easy answers and solutions (see the last point above). But as one physicist pointed out, it is child's play to understand theoretical physics compared to understanding child's play. Understanding molecules offers more law-like generalisations and predictions than understanding people and culture. The problems addressed by social science are complex and often don't have right or wrong answers, but hopefully offer better or worse ones. And often those answers depend on some mix of different levels of analysis.

The complexity of social science reflects the complexities of humanity at many scales and magnitudes. At a global level, scientists study wars and conflict, trans-national migration, cultures and religions, international cooperation and diplomacy between nations.

Zoom into a country and they look at forms of government and how power is gained, how the economy works.

Zoom further into policy domains and see social scientists looking at crime, aging, mental health, physical health (obesity, vaccine uptake, physical distancing), education, social care, the use of technology, the nature of work, the media, social cohesion, inequality and social injustice. You'll find them analysing organizations like companies, political parties, schools, prisons, cities, football clubs, unions and the forms of organization that describe how they work, and don't work, such as leadership, crowd behaviour, discrimination, power.

Zoom in further to see them study interpersonal behaviour whether in groups, teams or relationships. Looking into family systems offers yet more levels of complexity even before turning to individual differences and subjective experiences (of love, loneliness, stress, addiction, emotion, memory, motivation) let alone those who dive into perception, cognition, the unconscious and more.



These levels are intersecting and overlapping as much as we are, and the study of them leads social science to interact with other disciplines, from natural sciences on the one side to humanities on the other.

The impact and effects of this work are often diffuse and long term. Often they shape future norms or concepts, generating data and evidence, and often the origin of a new idea is lost in its adoption by common sense through what the sociologist Robert Merton called 'obliteration by incorporation'.

Of course there's good and bad, deep and trivial, applied and abstract work in social science as in all fields, and the mechanism of generating scholarship which translates to everyday impact and relevance is complex and sometimes badly broken through the many mixed incentives that come from trying to create academic reputations in higher education settings. As the social scientist [Garry Brewer](#) once pithily remarked 'the world has problems while universities have departments'.

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With all that said the cumulative intellectual labour of social scientists across the globe does have a powerful effect over time. And it is particularly satisfying watching Steve Reicher, now at St Andrews, commenting influentially on many of today's political issues. Many of you will have seen his work on government responses to COVID-19 as part of the behavioural science advisory committee to what we call 'the other SAGE' and latterly independent SAGE.



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But the moment that struck me most forcibly was after the death of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, one of which was the pulling down of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol — the same city where the St Paul's riots occurred 40 years before. Steve commented on how this event did not trigger riots this time around. And he gave particular credit to Chief Constable Andy Marsh, suggesting that if he had been there in 1980 there wouldn't have been riots. But the police have evolved in their training and tactics since then in part thanks to social scientists like Steve and his PhD students, now professors themselves in UK universities and often advising police on their responses to handling protests to avoid them turning into riots. The key point being to see crowds not as mad or bad but as highly minded and acting with reasons, and in contexts partly shaped by how the [police themselves intervene](#). Social science imagination in action! I don't know if Steve's, his colleagues' and others' impact has been obliterated through incorporation, but I can see the link through time.

This is just one example. Play it out over the various domains I described earlier and you might see why I'm incredibly grateful to the social scientists present and past who through their work have shaped and framed my way of thinking and a stance toward the world which I believe would, in countless ways, be much poorer for its absence.

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*This post was first published as [What I have Learned from Social Science](#) on Social Science Space.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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