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On Relevance (The Very Idea)

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As someone who thinks and works on the edges of the social sciences I am always curious about—and fascinated by—the ways in which ideas, feelings, propositions, demands, and attachments of various kinds have dynamically contributed and continue to contribute to articulating both the knowledge-practices of social scientific disciplines and the habits or ethical sensibilities that inform those forms of inquiry as well as their dreams, hopes, and fears. This is not to rehearse again the old dictum that it is merely ideas that make the world go round. Oftentimes, if not always, ideas emerge from unexpected, material encounters that force one to think something (a)new. But it seems nevertheless true, at least to me, that while the world is not made solely *of* ideas, it does partake in what, after philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1967), we might refer to as its own adventure of ideas.

The idea of ‘relevance’ has recently become almost ubiquitous in the ways in which the knowledge-practices of the social sciences are articulated, justified, funded, judged, criticised, and experienced. That the practices of such sciences must ‘be’ or ‘become’ relevant seems to have become a demand that is extremely hard to resist. And who would want to resist it? Who would want to suggest that the activity to which one dedicates one’s best efforts is *irrelevant* or that its relevance should not be a matter of concern? Yet, at the same time, there is often a sceptical tone that lies at the center of the various demands for relevance. One that, by posing the very question ‘how is this relevant?’, suspects that in fact the practices of the social sciences might, and likely do, fall short of convincing responses. Indeed, demands for relevance have materialised in a myriad of forms: in rather ‘apocalyptic’ texts about ‘the end’ of the social sciences and of universities more generally; in calls for ‘public engagement’, ‘impact’, ‘interdisciplinarity’, ‘self-auditing’, and ‘scientific accountability’; in public and policy debates around how funding should be allocated; in purportedly ‘emancipatory’ calls emerging within the social sciences that demand that ‘wider public issues’ be addressed; and many more.

Fuelling the recent sense that, yet again, the future of the social sciences is far from guaranteed, such a series of demands has become so widely disseminated and pressing, so much a part of daily scientific activities, that

it has failed to give rise to more profound reflections as to what ‘relevance’ might mean. As soon as the question ‘what does it mean for something to be relevant?’ is posed, however, all those multiple demands begin to appear under a different light. On the one hand, demands for relevance emerge in the context of a proposed reformation of the institutional and intellectual organisation of scientific activity that might foster more interdisciplinarity and greater accountability for scientific and technological innovation by becoming ‘embedded’ throughout research and development programmes, thereby better contributing to and informing policy and innovation (e.g. Felt 2014, Levidow & Neubauer 2014, Gibbons et al. 1994, Mayer et al. 2013, Nowotny et al. 2001, Rappert 1999). Thus, the 2013 Vinilus Declaration on the 2020 Horizons of the Social Sciences and Humanities in Europe states:

Making use of the wide range of knowledge, capabilities, skills and experiences readily available in SSH [Social Sciences and Humanities] will enable innovation to become embedded in society and is necessary to realise the policy aims predefined in the ‘Societal Challenges’. (Vinilus Declaration 2013)

On the other hand, calls for a more relevant social science emerge from a number of heterogeneous positions that see the latter as *already complicit* in forms of neoliberal governance and hence detached from wider moral and political public concerns (e.g. Burawoy, 2005, Evans 2005). In any case, questions about the extent to which the contemporary social sciences are ‘relevant’ are pervasive in the field.

Despite the aforementioned demands, it is somewhat puzzling that almost none of them emerges from any in-depth exploration of what ‘relevance’ entails, what place it occupies in the worlds that the social sciences encounter, which modes of inquiry it might require, and what kinds of habits of thought and feeling its understanding might help cultivate. ‘Relevance’ has become so ubiquitous and multifarious a demand, it has become such a ‘tyranny’—as political scientist Matthew Flinders (2013) has recently put it—that it has failed to raise any substantial, theoretical reflection on what it itself might involve. Enforced by some and dismissed by others, the notion of ‘relevance’ has become something of an empty placeholder that heralds an ideal solution to general, anonymous, and pre-existing problems. A solution whose conditions of success are said to be definable in advance, thus turning ‘relevance’ into an abstract criterion of demarcation (Fraser 2009).

That this be the case, however, is no reason to dismiss the concept. Quite to the contrary, in my view, it is an opportunity to wonder about what ‘relevance’ might come to entail while, at the same time, attempting to

produce a response that may allow us to resist the tyranny that often becomes associated with its demands and to speculate about what a social science that would take the question of relevance seriously could look like. The task, then, is to take relevance seriously while not immediately complying with what the demands that are posed in its name seem to assume about it.

Indeed, the idea that ‘relevance’ constitutes a solution to a pre-existing problem (whatever the problem might be) is common to most if not all of these demands as well as to some theories that use the concept in the information sciences. Relevance appears as a value that is *added* to the knowledges produced by the social sciences and whose conditions of success depend upon a process of recognition performed by a public. Interestingly, such a characterisation finds some support in one of the very few theories of relevance produced within the social sciences—namely, Alfred Schutz’s (1970) phenomenological theory, which proposes that relevance be conceived as the process whereby an individual consciousness encounters an unfamiliar object within an otherwise familiar surrounding and deploys efforts to interpret it. According to Schutz, this act of interpretation, combined with the subject’s own motivations, will transform the subject’s phenomenal field and future behaviour. Now, while there might be some psychological value in such an account, to reduce the question of relevance to a theory of subjective responses is, to my mind, deeply problematic.

Such an assumption forgets something crucial—namely, that the very emergence of a ‘response’ depends upon a situation posing a perplexing question. In other words, we cannot solve the perplexity induced by the problem of how things become relevant by saying that there is a subject recognising them as such. For the very experience of worth that allows something to be characterised as relevant involves a sense that there is value beyond ourselves, that something that is not ourselves *matters*. Thus, to include in our interrogation of the concept of relevance the perplexing questions that may elicit responses of diverse kinds is to cease thinking of relevance as a subjective appreciation of an otherwise irrelevant problem, and to restore to it its character as an event that belongs to the world. In other words, I want to entertain the proposition that relevance is not a value that the social sciences, or their publics, ‘add’ to the knowledges the former produce, but that it already inheres, as an event and as a problem to be developed, in the situations into which they inquire. In order to entertain this second understanding of relevance I propose we begin from a simpler and more self-evident expression, one that may allow us to turn the ‘tyranny’ that is often associated with the concept of relevance into a productive constraint upon social inquiry. This is the expression that *things matter*.

Things matter

This is at once an obvious and potentially powerful proposition. However, it is also one that our habits of thought, which have taught us to distrust our direct experiences, make surprisingly difficult to grasp. We should therefore tread carefully. In this sense, the riddling character of the verb ‘to matter’ might prove instructive. To say that things matter contains a double proposition, just like the verb ‘to matter’ conveys two senses. The key is to conjoin the two senses and propositions into one. On one pole, things matters as they *materialise*—they come into and remain temporarily in existence, they acquire a certain stubbornness. On the other, *and at the same time and by the very same process*, they matter as they become relevant to some degree and in some manner. The point is that there is not one sense of mattering without the other. Indeed, to the extent that something comes into existence, its coming in(to) matter is always specific and situated, and it is that situated specificity which makes the thing what it *is*—even if only momentarily—and which makes it matter. Minimally, then, everything that has a determinate existence (this human, this table, this keyboard, this idea, this feeling) has some relevance by virtue of being what it is—it matters that this thing is what it is, and that it is not something else. Indeed, as philosopher Tristan Garcia (2014) has recently argued, only a generic, indeterminate ‘anything’ is what does not matter—anything is ‘no-matter-what’. Namely, it does not matter what it is.

In other words, facts exist to the extent that they come (in)to matter in specific situations, and they matter insofar as they come into existence. In this way, relevance might be said to belong to what Whitehead (1968) described as the primary experience—it should be noted, not necessarily a ‘psychological’, ‘subjective’ or even ‘human’ experience—of the actual world. Namely, a value experience whose expression is none other than ‘Have a care, here is something that matters’ (1968: 116). As he argues (1968: 111):

Existence, in its own nature, is the upholding of value intensity. Also no unit can separate itself from the others, and from the whole. And yet each unit exists in its own right. It upholds a value intensity for itself, and this involves sharing value intensity with the universe. Everything that exists has two sides, namely, its individual self and its signification in the universe.

In this way, something comes (in)to matter for itself, for other things with which it composes a situation, and for the world of things to which it becomes added. It is to this event of a coming (in)to matter, and to the

problem it poses to those with whom it is concerned, that I want to associate the question of relevance.

Important implications follow from the seemingly obvious suggestion that things matter. The first implication is that the relevance of things is not something that is *added* to them by reason of a subjective process of recognition of worth. In contrast, relevance belongs to the world—it inheres in the nature of things. Second, if everything that exists matters in some degree and in some manner, then, conversely, everything that matters has some mode and degree of existence, even if this mode is not entirely ‘material’ or physical. This means that we should not confuse this proposition with what in recent years we have come to refer to as the ‘new materialisms’. Not because they’re ‘wrong’, but because, in this context, such a name might be misleading—matter matters, most certainly, but so does everything that exists, somewhere, in some way or another; ideas matter, ghosts matter, words matter, feelings matter.

Third, because the coming (in)to matter of things is always situated and specific, ‘there is no such thing a bare value’ (Whitehead 1926: 90); that is, there are no pure, general, universal, values. Values too are only specific, arising within the many situations in and for which things matter in different degrees and manners. In this way, the idea of relevance cannot become a general criterion that could demarcate what matters from what doesn’t, but needs to be approached as a question for wondering about how, to what degree, and in what manner, things come (in)to matter within specific situations.

To suggest that things *matter* is, then, to resist the longstanding bifurcation between fact and value, a side of a many-headed monster that Whitehead (2004) famously named ‘the bifurcation of nature’. As is well known, the bifurcation of nature consists in separating the world into two realms of reality. As Whitehead (2004: 30) phrases it, one side of this bifurcation would be ‘the nature apprehended in awareness’. The other, ‘the nature which is the cause of awareness’:

The nature which is the fact apprehended in awareness holds within it the greenness of the trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet. The nature which is the cause of awareness is the conjectured system of molecules and electrons which so affects the mind as to produce the awareness of apparent nature.

We can see such a bifurcation at work in many demands for relevance: on the one hand there are the “true” and “objective”, bare facts that science discovers; on the other, there is the relevance of those facts from the

public's point of view. That contemporary demands for relevance place truth and objectivity on the first side of reality is, to be sure, no surprise. Since the inauguration of modern science, the bifurcation of nature has been key to define the 'value-neutrality', 'objectivity', and 'truth' of scientific knowledge.

To suggest that facts *matter*, then, is a way of resisting this bifurcation. It is however certainly neither the first nor the only form of resistance; it is probably not the last one either. Another prominent attempt at resisting the distinction between fact and value is, for example, Bruno Latour's call to move from the anonymous and supposedly pure 'matters of fact' of modern epistemology, to always controversial and hybrid 'matters of concern' or 'things', as he calls them after Heidegger. Latour's (2004a: 246. emphasis in original) call was an attempt to simultaneously draw social scientists' attention to the liveliness of objects and to draw scientists' attention to their sociality, thereby simultaneously multiplying and distributing the many heterogeneous agencies that labour towards the making of things:

what is presented here is [...] a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence.

While I am appreciative of Latour's project and of his notion of "matters of concern" as a way of anchoring a different kind of social study of science, his project differs considerably from mine and, consequently, so does his way of resisting the modern distinction between facts and values.

Indeed, by inquiring into the question of relevance in contemporary social science, I am not calling anthropologists, philosophers, metaphysicians, historians, sociologists, political scientists, or psychologists to delve in to the making of 'things'. Things *matter* not just because many other things converge in their making, but quite simply because their coming into existence makes a difference to the worlds they help compose—they come into matter, and they matter to them. Thus, what concerns me is the exploration of what might be required—intellectually, ethically, and politically—for social scientific practices to take up 'relevance' as a question of the situated patterns that organise and relate humans, other-than-humans, ideas, feelings, and so on in ways that matter for those with which a problematic situation might be concerned. What I am interested in is not so much a different job description for social inquiry, but the possibility of a different *ethos* of social inquiry that would seek to negotiate the question 'how is it, here, that things matter?', without imposing on the 'thing' either a specific nature or a number in advance,

and without singlehandedly delimiting the horizon that defines where 'here' ends.

As a taster of what is a much longer project, I will just say that the key to this question is that any possible answer be negotiated in practice. Whenever a social scientist encounters a problematic situation as an object of inquiry, it is not simply her practice that makes that situation 'matter'. Rather, the situation is already constituted by an ecology of dynamic and fragile patterns of relevance, heterogeneous objects and relations, to which her questions, her assumptions, theories, and methods, in sum, her mode of knowledge-production become added. Such an addition, to be sure, is never innocent, that is, it has effects—it affects the ecology of such patterns in different ways. Thus, the point is that 'negotiation' means neither that it is her questions or methods themselves that, as it were, produce that ecology out of thin air, nor that her goal is that of discovering the relevant way of defining the problem that characterises the situation as if such a way could be said to fully preexist the questions themselves. By contrasts, problems are always a matter of 'invention'—a notion that, in my reading, conjoins discovery and creativity. Isabelle Stengers (1997: 6) expresses the nature of a negotiation of relevance with notable clarity in the case of experimental sciences when she argues:

What is noteworthy about 'relevance' is that it designates a relational problem. One speaks of a relevant question when it stops thought from turning in circles and concentrates the attention on the singularity of an object or situation. Although relevance is central to the effective practices of the experimental sciences, in their public version it often boils down to objective truth or arbitrary decision: to objective truth when the question is justified by the object in itself, and to arbitrary decision when it refers to the use of an instrument or experimental apparatus whose choice is not otherwise commented on. In the first case, the response appears to be "dictated" by reality. In the second, it appears to be imposed by the all-powerful categories of which the investigative instrument is bearer. Relevance designates, on the contrary, a subject that is neither absent nor all-powerful.

Thus, the question of relevance is one which affects the modes by which social scientific practices interrogate and negotiate how things come (in)to matter—it is a question that makes social scientific inquiry into a risky process. In this way, relevance should be understood as a problem that affects the very situated exchanges that make every answer dependent upon the question that calls for it, and every solution to a problem dependent on, or *deserving of*, the manner in which the problem is defined

(Deleuze 1994). For every definition of a problem guiding inquiry and every question that may point to an unknown that a scientific practice of knowledge-making may seek to address also produces a pattern of contrasts that productively constrains the range of possible answers that might matter to it.

Nothing guarantees, however, that the pattern of contrasts will address the object in a manner that matters to it, her, or him. If relevance is to become capable of affecting the manner of directing practical inquiries in the social sciences, of feathering the arrow of questions in a way that matters for those to whom the questions are posed, then the term cannot designate, *ex post*, or worse, *ex ante*, the effect that a knowledge-product has in relation to the public to which it may be communicated. Relevance needs to be thought as an active constraint upon practice—a constraint that forces social scientists to put the pattern of contrast that a question generates, that is, the assumptions that underpin it, at risk.

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Note

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the development of a new ethics of inquiry for the contemporary social sciences oriented by the question of relevance.

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