

A New Framework for Social Science

Bruce Kapferer (bruce.kapferer@gmail.com) is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, University of Bergen and Professorial Fellow in Anthropology, University College London. He is Director of EU Advanced Research Project on Egalitarianism. He has conducted research in Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe and the US and has published widely.

Experience, Caste and the Everyday Social by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, India: Oxford University Press, 2019; pp 224, ₹ 4,339 (hardcover).

This volume extends from issues raised by the authors of *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (2012) that addressed critical matters in the cultural and social world of contemporary India, not least the thorny issue of caste and its enduring inequities. The matter of caste continues as a vital concern, especially towards the end of this book. In *The Cracked Mirror*, the authors questioned whether the social sciences as currently constituted, largely in accordance with the terms of European and North American (“Western”) philosophical and political hegemony, are adequate to the task of comprehending realities as complex as that of India. Their larger point is that the routine realities of India considered in *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social* expose the limitations of a hitherto dominant Western-derived social science.

The India context, and most specifically the multiplicity of traditions or ways of life (especially of a religio--moral-philosophical kind) vital in the tension of contemporary India, challenges accepted orientations and gives solid ground for rethinking the social in such a way that a social science as truly a science of the social with a stronger claim to general applicability may be achievable. The book offers an approach to the social that is both more comprehensive and more cross-culturally inclusive than hitherto.

Of central and overarching importance for the structuring of the argument in this volume is the non-dualism, or holism, of the perspective (driven particularly by the grounding of the authors in the India context) that counteracts as it productively modifies the dualism that underpins the Western scientific and social science practice.

While I will stress the significance of the holist stance of the authors, the book refreshingly overcomes the easy potential to oppose India to the West. That is, to simply reverse the terms of the discourse effectively persisting in a dualism and against the interests of a more inclusive understanding of social processes. Overall, this is a synthetic work in which the problematics of different orientations to the social are overcome through the other dualism in holism and vice versa.

Revisioning of Social Sciences

The result is a work that must be considered an important methodological contribution to a revisioning of the social sciences, which is virtually ontological in depth and aimed at a rethinking of fundamental assumptions that may both lift the social sciences out of their Eurocentrism and expand the value of their pragmatic intervention.

Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai situate the establishment of the social sciences within the history and philosophy of the natural or so-called hard sciences, a history that has major effect on the emergence of a secularised rationalist culture, in the West and now globally. This culture found its initial exemplification in the European Enlightenment, an ideological grounding for the social sciences, and vital in their hegemony, that the holism that frames Guru and Sarukkai’s approach contends. More immediately, here, the achievements and authority that the natural sciences gained resulted in a general value being

Economic & Political WEEKLY

attached to nature and to the natural that found its chief representation in the social sciences as well as, of course, effecting their strong commitment to positivist methodologies in their establishment that have persisted despite strong criticisms in the sciences and, indeed, in the social sciences (sometimes of holist orientation, for example, as in the social philosophy of Gilles Deleuze after the work of Henri Bergson).

Guru and Sarukkai discuss the natural sciences or hard sciences as having developed highly relativised and differentiating understandings of nature and the natural. Nature is an operational concept in practice that varies from one discipline to another and within disciplines. There is no necessary fixed agreement. This is less so, Guru and Sarukkai suggest, in the social sciences. Often the social has been defined against nature that is often given an abstract, overly generalised, stable value. Nature or the natural is treated as if it is apart from the social even if in some way determinant of the social or integrated with it.

The authors also critique the tendency in the social sciences to “naturalise” the social. That is, to ascribe natural value to elements or processes that are social. What is a social construction becomes a natural given or is presented as if it is a determinant force outside and/or underlying the social or society.

Distorting Dualism

Guru and Sarukkai argue that in the social sciences nature or the natural chiefly enters into the understanding of the social as a metaphor independently of the complexities of its understanding in the sciences. The process of nature is separated from the process of the social: a dualism that produces a distorting and restricted understanding of the social, which the authors avoid in this volume.

Aspects of what Guru and Sarukkai critique in the social sciences are evident in the work of the main founding fathers of the social sciences (for example, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud). This is definitely the case with Durkheim, for many the key figure in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Thus, for Durkheim the methods of social science are to be based on the physical sciences and applied to the study of society as if it is an organic system of functionally integrated parts. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, a follower of Durkheim and highly influential in the formation of social anthropology, is more explicit on the matter in his *A Natural Science of Society* (1957), where he sets out his Durkheimian vision. It is radically contested in this book where the social is presented as continuously taking a different shape rather than being examined as an integrated systemic whole.

The major legacy of the natural sciences in the social sciences that Guru and Sarukkai address is reductionism that is compounded in a dualism of thought and practice. In the social sciences, the individual is frequently taken to be the basic unit of the social and often reduced out of the social, in fact, treated as a virtually natural irreducible atomic element underpinning the social.

Again Durkheim illustrates the point as do many others since then. Durkheim is conventionally conceived as creating a non-reductionist sociology. Thus, he describes the social and society as transcendent of the individual elements that are effectively units of nature that become social through processes of their relational collectivisation into a society (Durkheim 1912).

Part of Routine Practice

Guru and Sarukkai challenge the Durkheimian notion of society as a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Not only does such a notion reduce the natural out of the social, but it naturalises the individual failing to fully grasp the very notion of the individual as a social value and part of a process that is social as such. Important directions in the social sciences refuse the social as a dynamic in nature and focus on the individual as given to ego-driven self-interest as a natural impetus divorced from the social. The understanding of the social and of the natural in the social is diminished.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

The powerful suggestion in the book under review is that individualist reductionism and social holism or transcendental abstraction of the Durkheimian kind (but far from limited to Durkheim) are countered in the holism of religio–moral philosophies of religions labelled in much social science as “traditional” but integral in various aspects to the everyday life of many in India. Traditional is a concept that is not used in this book. It smacks of a Eurocentric dualism with which the authors contend and supports rejection of philosophies that are no less modern or contemporaneous in the West and their potential import for a social science that is apart from Aristotelian and Kantian orientations.

The holist direction that Guru and Sarukkai develop is evident from the start of their empirical application. They begin with the five senses, crucial elements in the sensory (and humoral) schemes so much part of the religious philosophies of India, but manifest, if differently, in so many traditions past and present throughout the world (significantly among the Greek pre-Socratics and continuing into the Christian era, though marginalised or suppressed). That such philosophies are not simply abstractions but in various ways part of the very ground of routine practice, in the India context particularly, lends support to the more general comparative claims for the approach in this book; a perspective that is concerned primarily with lived practices, the everyday, with the aim of breaking away from the over-totalising and especially reductionist/transcendentalist approaches that maintain some dominance in the social sciences.

The holism of Guru and Sarukkai’s orientation grasps the social, or processes integral to the social, as throughout every dimension of the life world or existence, regardless of such distinctions as animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, etc. If human beings are centred in a social world, the forces of the social (at one with the natural) might be said to pre-exist them, as is explicit in some of the mythologies of the religious traditions to which they refer.¹ In such conception the social is highly fluid in process continually taking a diverse and changing shape, a feature of the multiplicities of being of Hindu cosmology, for example.

Guru and Sarukkai in no way valorise the religious in their holist perspective. They critique the abstract, atemporal, and non-authorial features of sacred textual traditions showing how these contribute to uncritical acceptance that contributes to the intransigence of caste and its humiliating inequities. That the ideas in the texts are part of routine everyday practice is a compounding factor of their already “naturalisation” or specific form of essentialism arising from the holist emphasis on the coextension of the natural and the social.

Gandhi and Ambedkar

Guru and Sarukkai pursue a secularised holism influenced by B R Ambedkar and M K Gandhi. The considerable differences and tensions between these two towering figures aside, the authors focus on Ambedkar and Gandhi’s concern to effect a reevaluation of key concepts within holist thought and practice in India that are critical for the reproduction of inequities, particularly with regard to caste, despite major efforts by governments and other agencies in India to address and overcome them. As the authors indicate, programmes that attempt redress through economic and other political and social policies (ones highly influenced by a European Enlightenment rationalist/reductionist social science) while having some success have also had negative effect. Guru and Sarukkai examine some of the double binds involved, whereby the disadvantages attaching to caste identity are intensified or achieve new discriminating effect despite liberalising intention. They stress the importance, for example, of Gandhi’s orientation to achieve a reevaluation of notions, such as karma or rebirth, key concepts in the reproduction of caste and its discriminations across space and through time. Gandhi’s re-evaluation was intended to achieve a liberalising effect and address vital aspects of the caste system that a reductionist and dualist social science by and large do not meet.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

Ambedkar's (influenced by Buddhism) notion of the social is more uncompromisingly directed against the institution of caste than is that of Gandhi (who as some of his recent critics claim sustains the religious/ritual frame of caste) and it is with Ambedkar that a stronger idea of the potential of the social within holism is developed. The authors stress Ambedkar's ethical direction in the concept of *maitri* and the notion of the social that avoids the reduction to ego-centred individualism and the kind of rationalist calculus that has found strong emphasis in the social sciences that the authors critique.

For Guru and Sarukkai, the social, as I read them and as indicated above, is the unifying but continually emerging, differentiating, heterogeneous force throughout existence and its ever-changing contexts. In the holism that they present, existence is social from the beginning. It does not evolve into the social (from an individual base nor is the social a transcendence of the non-social). Ambedkar is for the full realisation (implicit in the concept of belonging which the authors develop in this volume) of the social against the contradictions that are the lesser potential of the social and manifest in its many differentiations, for - example, the restrictions and exclusions of caste. The full realisation of the social, for Ambedkar, is the overcoming of the inequities of caste in the impetus of the social to its full realisation.

Guru and Sarukkai's secularised holism certainly offers a new philosophical basis for a revisioning of the social sciences. Certain aspects of their direction have been attempted by others but from within the Western tradition who also are critical of the dualism discussed in this review. Significantly perhaps, they are anthropologists for whom the exploration of cultural value is of central value. The two scholars to whom I refer are Louis Dumont (1980, 1990) and McKim Marriott (1979), both students of social practices in India and highly consciousness of the philosophical ground as being outside the Aristotelian/Kantian understanding of dominant approaches to the social. The two disagreed on perspective, Marriott taking a broad position within India-based philosophical traditions along the lines of Guru and Sarukkai. Marriott is arguably more subjectivist and his position has had major import for critical discussion within the social sciences referred to by some these days as post-humanist orientations that are holist in direction recognising the social in the natural. I refer in particular to the anti-Durkheimian and to a degree anti-structuralist orientation of Bruno Latour with whom the authors recognise some affinity. However, the work of Dumont may be more pertinent to the underlying egalitarian mood of the volume and specifically regarding the inequities of caste.

With Guru and Sarukkai, Dumont is critically concerned with the forces (chiefly the values) that underpin the perpetuation of caste inequities. He develops his understanding into a radical critique of Western social science and some of its major philosophical currents, including what he identifies as its particular reductionist ethos of what he calls "egalitarian individualism" and rationalist economic calculus. Some of the problematics of India (regarding caste and ethnic conflict) he puts down to a grossly inadequate hegemonic social science that if it fails for India also fails for the West. His holist sociological orientation abstracts its principles from that indicated by thought and practice in India (but removed from its religious/ritual integument that he takes to be integral to the perpetuation of inequities) to suggest a path towards a more comparative and valid social science. Guru and Sarukkai might be seen as travelling if not the same path, then the one that is parallel. Furthermore, they see in the India materials the possibility of inventing a social science that has egalitarian and liberating potentials that may overcome some of the pragmatic problems of dominant social science whether in India or elsewhere.

Recentering of Social Sciences

The social science that Guru and Sarukkai propose has resonance with many of the critical directions that have been taken in the West but are now largely global and these are acknowledged. They stress an approach that is attentive to everyday practice and are critical of abstractions that are not grounded in the life world. Guru and Sarukkai concentrate on process and the social as enduringly emergent under

Economic&PoliticalWEEKLY

continuing varying circumstances. There are many socials and the authors are critical of writing about society as some homogeneous bounded totality. Much of what they have to say is asserted by critics within the Durkheimian tradition and without. Social science, particularly in the sociologies (sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, perhaps political science, but less so in economics or psychology) are moving in the directions recommended in this book. There is an obvious social phenomenological turn in this volume, but more towards Martin Heidegger than Edmund Husserl, orientations that are certainly open to the kind of holist philosophies of the contexts from within which the authors write. Nonetheless, these lines of thought and practice largely remain in frames of understanding still bound to a particular Western Enlightenment history of the emergence of the social sciences, that may continue to impede general understanding across a vast array of difference that is integral to the vitality of humanity as a whole.

This short book packed with many insights has a subversive feel about it. In the opinion of this reviewer a new framework for social science is proffered in the holism that underlies and unites the various arguments. Gilles Deleuze, a social philosopher who maintains much currency in this world of globalised crisis, promoted the importance of what he labelled as minor discourses or those perspectives marginalised or suppressed in the reign of the dominant. Even so, Deleuze himself tended to champion the traditions of his European-centred world that he saw as truly philosophical surpassing the religious philosophies of the East. Guru and Sarukkai, mindful of the contributions of that philosophical world of science that gave rise to the social sciences, make an excellent case for the recentring of the social sciences within the potent world views of orientations that have been too easily neglected and dismissed as traditional.

Note

1 The Agganna Sutta of the Buddhist Digha Nikaya about the origin of the world and presented in dramatic form in everyday ritual makes the point. It tells of an already social natural world into which humanity enters who are outside the orders of the social but who, seeing their own chaotic condition, constitute the order of such an already social existence. See Bruce Kapferer's *The Feast of the Sorcerer* (1997).

References

Dumont, Louis (1980): *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

— (1990): *Essays on Individualism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Durkheim, Émile (1912): *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, UK: Oxford University Press.

Marriott, McKim (1979): "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism," *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, B Kapferer (ed), Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, pp 109–42.

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/25/book-reviews/new-framework-social-science.html>
