

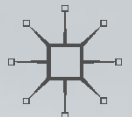


THE ADVENTURE OF RELEVANCE

An Ethics of Social Inquiry

Martin Savransky

with a foreword by
Isabelle Stengers



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An Ethics of Social Inquiry

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Foreword, by Isabelle Stengers

Relevance as an adventure! Martin Savransky's proposal sounds both like an appeal and a challenge. Among the many words which, today, have been captured by neo-liberal governance, relevance may be the most entrapping one. Who would claim irrelevance? Who would affirm that the knowledge she is concerned with is unable to make the least difference for our understanding of its object, or can be of interest for nobody, even her colleagues? Obviously, arcane fields in mathematics, physics, or philology may claim 'disinterestedness', but even there examples are promoted that tell how a piece of abstract knowledge that looked like devoid of any imaginable consequences came to matter, acquired an importance nobody would contest.

What to do when a word has been dishonoured—here, when relevance comes to mean that researchers in the social sciences have to answer institutional demands, contribute to the solution of pre-set problems the formulation of which they have to globally accept, and when they have to pre-define the 'impact' of their work? To abandon it would quickly leave us wordless or reduced to the noble exercise of critical denunciation—an inexhaustible resource, certainly, but one that can relate recalcitrant social sciences and humanities to a dangerously inflated idea of the importance of the critical stance as the only buttress against so-called objectifying, non-reflexive, positive scientific practices.

Martin Savransky's proposition spoils this oppositional game. If relevance means the event of a 'coming to matter', it should have significance across the whole diversified field of so-called modern sciences and have them all resisting, each in its own way, to what would thwart their specific adventure. Certainly, in the experimental sciences relevance can be related to the infamous 'Nature has spoken', which transforms into a claim for authority the specific achievement which is the very soul of the experimental adventure: experimental 'facts' able, *in the specific situation of the laboratory*, to verify that their promoters have posed a relevant question to what they dealt with. Right from the beginning, Galileo and his successors have indeed privileged 'the authority of the facts' over the event of relevance, downplaying the very specific and exceptional character of their achievement, encouraging the exportation 'out of the lab' of what has proved to be relevant in the lab.

As we know, the experimenters' usual disregard for the possibility that relevance may be lost in translation, that the 'objective knowledge' they obtain is situation-dependant, has not been challenged by other sciences. Scientific authority has proved such a potent lure for scientists, and also such a potent lever for those who Bruno Latour called 'the allies of Science' (State and the industry), that the proposition that relevance and what it entails must be taken seriously and defended as such can strangely enough be called 'speculative' in a double sense: it activates what may be possible against the power of the state of affairs, and it implies that relevance—something coming to matter—is an 'event of the world', not a subjective appreciation. When critiques deconstruct the experimenters' 'Nature has spoken', they are right to deconstruct the claim that this must matter for everybody, whatever the situation, but they are wrong to deconstruct the event—something coming to matter for something else may well be the (speculative) formula for what William James characterised as the 'universe in the making'.

It may well be that *reclaiming* relevance against the dominant state of academic affairs is today a collective critical concern for all sciences as none has escaped the temptation of downplaying or even willingly ignoring, in the name of progress, the 'messy' answer the social-natural worlds were liable to give to what they proposed as objectively mattering. What Savransky calls the 'ecology of dynamic and fragile patterns of relevance, of modes of mattering for oneself and for others' has often been 'discov-

ered' too late, after a pattern has suffered the so-called unfortunate collateral damages occasioned by a techno-social innovation. The way our worlds have been shaped tells us about the striking absence of this 'care of knowledge' which Savransky associates with relevance, and we should ask to those who would protest that knowledge must be uncaring in order to be 'objective', the question never to be forgotten: 'cui bono?' In the social sciences especially, objectivity can hardly be dissociated from the silencing of those voices who would contest an innovation and demand that attention be paid to some of its, in fact quite foreseeable, destructive consequences. When a sociologist deals about the 'public perception of a problem' it must be said that the study usually turns to be about the statistical analysis of the many ways in which the public opinion is wrong about this problem.

Conversely, Martin Savransky's book cannot be dissociated from our epoch, when it is no longer a question of 'unfortunate collateral damages' brought by the kind of development vectorised by techno-scientific innovations, but of the very future of the inhabitants of the planet, humans, and non-humans. The (capitalist) privilege given to disembedded and disembedding knowledge and strategies has opposed giving relevance to the messy complications of this world. But messiness is returning with a vengeance. Ignoring it, dreaming of its eradication, we discover that we have not only messed up our world but also, unwittingly but quite efficiently, triggered the destruction of the very stability of this world, the only one we have. If there is a chance to escape the worse, it demands a determinate refusal to entrust our endangered future to the very same ones who have created this situation, are still imposing their business-as-usual approach, and now begin to openly dream of geo-engineering and of a 'rational management' of the earth. We urgently need sciences that reclaim relevance, sciences that learn to embrace the entangled 'sociality' of this world, and contribute, through their inquiries, to make it matter, to resist both careless and uncaring techno-social interventions.

In order to take relevance seriously Martin Savransky has called to the companionship of a number of thinkers, among whom I am honoured to figure. The common feature shared by these companions is their pragmatist conception of thinking as a transformative exercise, against what he calls the 'ethics of estrangement' taken as the condition to gain access to the realm of facts and causes beyond that of illusory appearances. The

experience of relevance, Savransky writes, ‘involves a sense that *there is value beyond ourselves*—that something that is not ourselves, *matters*.’ This heralds a second common feature of the companions he is thinking with. One way or another, reclaiming relevance means daring to connect the speculative, the ethical, and the practical, that is, to craft lines of escape from the territory organised by the three *Critiques* of Immanuel Kant.

Against Kant, the master of the ethics of estrangement who prohibited speculation and proposed that we should address nature as judges interrogating suspects, not as students learning from their teacher, he proposes the figure of the apprentice, who has to learn how to know, a learning always situated by the problematic situation which she must succeed in allowing it to become her teacher. A demanding adventure indeed, and a risky one, since it admits no final arbiter, no ground to judge the teaching. But to accept this risk, to renounce knowledge as a right and embrace its achievement as an event, is precisely the specificity of the adventure of the modern sciences when they aim at relevance, what requires the kind of collective—both critical and cooperative—effort which is its very soul.

As for philosophers who recall that Kant made Horace’s *Sapere aude!*, dare to know, the motto of the Enlightenment, even if he himself meant ‘dare to use your own reason’, it may be that they should also recall that ‘sapere’ was related to ‘taste’ and that tasting implies the risky and careful encounter with something which can sustain or poison. To dare and taste may well be what is demanded in order to counter the deadly question ‘Is relevance “objective” or “subjective”?’ We have to dare and taste the poison of this question, which is the mother of the blind alignment of our practices with what Alfred North Whitehead dubbed as the absurdity at the very heart of modern thought: the ‘bifurcation of nature’. This may mean accepting the challenge proposed by William James in *Pragmatism and Humanism* about the ideas, theories, and modes of intervention taken as additions to the universe in the making: ‘The great question is: does it, with our additions, rise or fall in value? Are the additions worthy or unworthy?’

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1

Introduction: The Care of Knowledge

Stepping Out into the Open

In 1971 Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar, internationally renowned for his *magnum opus* *Hopscotch* (1966), as well as for his fantastic short stories, wrote a piece titled *Prosa del observatorio*,¹ a text which according to conventional literary genres would seem to be unclassifiable. While Cortázar is certainly well-known for a form of literature where not only realism and fantasy are intertwined to the point of becoming indistinguishable, but which also transgresses the rules of composition of literary canons, many of the reviewers of *From the Observatory* (2011) agree in regarding this piece as his most unconventional work. A dream-like visual prose poem-cum-letter-cum-essay that today might be associated with a speculative fabulation on science and life, I read *From the Observatory* as a plea that speaks to the future. Indeed, to a possible future which, while perhaps unlikely, remains a vital source for cultivating a different mode of inhabiting the world.

¹Translated by Anne Mclean as *From the Observatory* (2011).

By moving between a response to an article on the life cycle of eels published in *Le Monde* on 14 April 1971, and the spectral, visual experience of the wonderful structures of the Maharajah Jai Singh's eighteenth-century astronomical observatories in Jaipur and Delhi, the poem articulates a proposition for a different mode of cultivating that very peculiar kind of experience that we normally call 'knowing'. A mode that, throughout this book, I will attempt to make resonate with some of the challenges with which contemporary forms of social inquiry are confronted today.

In encountering the poem, one realises that what sets it into motion is nothing other than an experience of perplexity. And such a perplexity is twofold. First, it concerns the lively, moving, and disconcertingly epic life cycle of eels,

eels born in the Atlantic depths that begin, because we have to begin to follow them, to grow, translucent larvae floating between two waters, crystalline amphitheater of jellyfish and plankton, mouths that slide in an interminable suction, bodies linked in the now multi-form serpent that some night, no one can know when, will rise up leviathan, emerge as an inoffensive and terrifying kraken, to initiate the migration along the ocean floor [...] [After living] for so many years at the edge of blades of water [the eels] return to submerge themselves in the gloom of the depths for hundred meters down, lay their eggs hidden by half a kilometre of slow silent thickness, and dissolve in death by the millions of millions, molecules of plankton that the first larvae already sip in the palpitation of incorruptible life. (Cortázar 2011: 19–20)

In attending to their adventures, Cortázar wonders about those eels that spend their lives 'at the edge of blades of water' travelling upstream while in the process they 'grow and change color [...] the muddy mimetic yellow [giving] way bit by bit to mercury'; those eels that, according to 'an obscure piece of wisdom from remote bestiaries', at some point in their life 'leave the water and invade the vegetable patches and orchard groves (those are the kinds of words they use in the bestiaries) to hunt for snails and worms, to eat the garden peas as it says in the Espasa Encyclopedia, which knows so much about eels' (2011: 40). He wonders, perplexed,

about why, after such a saga, the eels ‘commit suicide in their millions in the sluice gates and nets so the rest can pass and arrive’ (2011: 29).

Perhaps what is most striking to Cortázar, however, is what becomes of the tragic adventure of the eels as they encounter the knowledge-practices of science, that ‘lovely’ science whose ‘sweet’ words ‘follow the course of the elvers and tell us their saga’ and whose astronomers from the observatory in Jaipur once ‘wielded a vocabulary just as lovely and sweet to conjure the unnameable and pour it onto soothing parchments, inheritance for the species, school lesson, barbiturate for essential insomniacs’ (2011: 29). What he finds puzzling, as do others—myself included—is the manner in which the quest for a knowledge that could be called ‘scientific’ transforms the eels’ adventures into a set of ‘theories of names and phases’ that ‘embalm eels in a nomenclature, in genetics, in a neuroendocrine process, from yellow to silver, from ponds to estuaries’ and attempts to hold the cosmos still by ‘gather[ing] into one mental fist the reins of that multitude of twinkling and hostile horses’. For Cortázar, the consequence is inevitable: ‘the stars flee Jai Singh’s eyes just as the eels do the words of science’ (2011: 42).

While the scope of Cortázar’s plea exceeds the specific procedures and requirements of neuroendocrinology and astronomy to encompass science as a whole, including the social sciences, it is not a mere rejection of either scientific practice or knowledge. He does not claim that the lively journey of eels or the cosmos should intrinsically escape scientific inquiry, nor does he necessarily anticipate that his own poetic experiment might be better equipped to come to grips with the dynamic, open nature of reality as such:

dear Madame, what would we do without you, Lady Science, I’m speaking seriously, very seriously, but besides there is the open, the redheaded night, the units of excess, the clowning, tightrope walking, somnambulist quality of the average citizen, the fact that no one will convince him that his precise limits are those of the happiest city or the most pleasant countryside; school does what it does, and the army, the priests, but what I call eel or milky way persists in a species memory, in a genetic program Professor Fontaine has no idea of, and so the revolution in its moment, attacking the objectively abject or enemy, the delirious swipe to bring down a rotten city, so the first stages of the reencounter with the whole man. (2011: 62)

Rather than opposing scientific inquiry, what Cortázar's plea is trying to resist is a specific *kind* of science. He opposes a science that, in exclusively attempting 'to measure, compute, understand, belong, enter, die less poor, to oppose this studded incomprehensibility hand to hand' (2011: 41), would not risk stepping out into the open thereby failing to come to terms with what matters to those it addresses. As he forcefully affirms in addressing his two figurative epitomes of scientific rationality:

So, Professor Fontaine, it's not diffuse pantheism we're talking about, nor dissolution in mystery: the stars are measurable, the ramps of Jaipur still bear traces of mathematical chisels, cages of abstraction and understanding. What I reject while you gill me up with information on the course of the leptocephali is the sordid paradox of an impoverishment correlated to the multiplication of libraries, microfilms and paperback editions, enlightenment á la Jivaro, Mademoiselle Callamand. Let Lady Science stroll through her garden, sing and embroider, fair is her figure and necessary her remote-controlled distaff and her electronic lute, we are not the Boeotians of our century, the brontosaurus is well and truly dead. But then one goes out to wander in the night, as so many of Lady Science's servants undoubtedly do too, and if one lives for real, if night and our breathing and thought link those meshes that so many definitions separate, it can happen that we might enter parks in Jaipur or Delhi, or in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés we might brush against another possible profile of man; laughable or terrible things can happen to us, we might access cycles that begin in the doorway of a café and end up on a gallows in the main square of Baghdad, or stepping on an eel in the rue du Dragon, or spotting from afar like in a tango that woman who filled our life with broken mirrors and structuralist nostalgia (she never finished doing her hair, and we never finished our doctoral thesis). (2011: 56–57)

In this way, the plea that opens up the space for such an unclassifiable text bears the mark of a challenge—a challenge for scientific inquiries not to demand compliance of what they seek to understand, and instead, to learn to come to terms with it. Again, learning to come to terms with it does not imply ceasing to ask questions and dissolving our inquiries into utter mysticism. Rather, it involves speculating on the possibility of inventing new and different modes of asking questions—'*we must*',

he urges us, ‘feather and launch the arrow of the question another way, from another departure point, toward something else’ (2011: 43, emphasis added).

Reconstructing Social Inquiry or, What Is Ethics?

In a sense, the plea that *From the Observatory* articulates in its own inimitable style is one that resonates with a series of urgent questions with which the contemporary social sciences are confronted today—a series of questions that constitute the very core of this book. How might the knowledges produced by the social sciences come to terms with this global and complex world, indeed, this world of ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’, as William James (1957: 488) once described it from the perspective of the early experience of a baby? What new modes of feathering and launching questions might we have to invent, from where and in what directions would we launch them, were we concerned with producing forms of knowledge that will contribute not merely to the multiplication of paperbacks but to the future of those who, in Cortázar’s words, ‘live for real’?

Insofar as the invention of the modern social sciences in the nineteenth century can be said to be related to the emergence of practical problems of governance of expanding and increasingly complex populations, such questions may be thought to be anything but new. However, the modernist mode of posing those questions, the subsequent history of the social sciences throughout the twentieth- and into the twenty-first century, as well as the global socio-material transformations of the world during this period, testify to the need, or more, the demand, to simultaneously reclaim those questions and *reconstruct* the manner in which they are cultivated and launched.

In a sense, then, the attempt this book will make could be associated to a transformed version of John Dewey’s (2004) project of ‘reconstruction’. Dewey’s aim in his project of reconstructing philosophy after the First and the Second World War was marked by what he saw as the demand upon philosophy and the problems with which it was concerned to become relevant to the continuous changes in human affairs which at times constitute veritable events in the world’s history. Concerned with

what he perceived as a profound disjunction between the premises of philosophical inquiry and the unstable consequences of the ingression of scientific inventions into the realm of human affairs throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Dewey sought to redress this disconnection by producing a reconstruction of the manner in which philosophical inquiry is conducted.

Philosophy, Dewey argued, cannot continue confining itself to dealing only with that which is ‘taken to be fixed, immutable, and therefore out of time [...], that is, eternal.’ In contrast, it had to become capable of dealing with the urgent demands of the world with which it was then confronted. Demands that, in science, in technology and in politics, forced one to ‘abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually “universal” is *process*’ (Dewey 2004: vii–viii, emphasis in original). So what is a reconstruction?

As Dewey (2004: xvii) forcefully claimed, ‘reconstruction can be nothing less than the work of developing, of forming, of producing (in the literal sense of that word), the intellectual instrumentalities which will progressively direct inquiry.’ Dewey’s aim was the production of intellectual instrumentalities, of conceptual tools, for the ‘construction of a moral human science’ which would allow a reorientation of human affairs and provide ‘other conditions of a fuller life than man has enjoyed’ (2004: xxii). The inquiry that the production of such intellectual instruments would progressively direct was, for him, an inquiry concerned with the ‘deeply and inclusively human—that is to say, moral—facts of the present scene and situation’ (xviii).

The kinds of criticisms that Cortázar levels against ‘Lady Science’, namely, the proliferations of technical names, of methods and instruments at the expense of an ‘impoverished’ experience of the world, one that prevents us from coming to terms with what matters for those who ‘live for real’, intimately resonate with Dewey’s plea for reconstruction. To be sure, they also seemingly resonate with the dangerous backdrop against which C. Wright Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination* (2000) attempted to articulate a liberating promise—a promise against the danger of indulging in totalising yet impenetrable and thus, inert, ‘grand theories’, on the one hand, and of an inhibition prompted by confusing methodology with the substantive issues at stake—what Mills terms

‘abstracted empiricism’—on the other. Today, Mills’s ‘promise of social science’ is one which has regained importance in current debates around the so-called crisis of contemporary social science. Such a crisis, I shall argue later in the book, can be read as a series of demands for such sciences to both justify and enhance the ‘relevance’ of their practices at a time when their institutional and material survival within universities seems to be under threat of dissolution.

Given this historical conjuncture, I am of the view that a project of reconstruction might constitute a productive means of engaging some of the challenges faced by the contemporary social sciences. If they are to intervene productively in the institutional and intellectual challenges that besiege their presents and possible futures, we need now, more than ever, a creative, reconstructive activity of conceptual and practical invention. Nevertheless, because the conditions that the social sciences face today differ in important ways from those that constituted the point of departure of the Deweyian project, we cannot carry out a reconstruction of contemporary forms social inquiry without, at the same time, posing anew the question of what the task of reconstruction might involve today.

Thus, while in the early twentieth century Dewey saw the construction of social and human sciences as a promising mode of reconstructing philosophy, the developments in the mainstream of such sciences throughout the last century suggest that, today, they might themselves be the ones in need of reconstruction. These developments show, moreover, that the ‘deep and inclusively human facts’ that he regarded as the aim of such enterprise have been taken to be—rather disappointingly—only ‘exclusively’ human. As I shall argue later on, in an age of global crises of both economy and ecology, a reconstruction that reclaims the concern for the deeply and inclusively human is not about an entrenched defence of the all-too-modern forms of anthropocentric humanism. Rather, what it requires is precisely that we question the exclusive humanisms that the social sciences have instituted in their habits of thinking and feeling and that we take the risk of *reimagining* the relationships between humans and the more-than-human milieus of which they are a part.

A further difference between a classic Deweyian exercise in ‘reconstruction’ and the one that this book will carry out concerns the kind of work that such intellectual instrumentalities are meant to perform.

In other words, it concerns the kind of tools that such an exercise may produce. Indeed, for Dewey intellectual instrumentalities are conceived, at least partially, as the invention of solutions to a pre-existing problem of relevance that affected the dominant mode of philosophical inquiry at the turn of the twentieth century. A problem of relevance characterised by philosophy's incapacity to come to terms with the transient nature of events that demanded urgent inquiry. In order to overcome this problem, Dewey proposed that philosophy had to abandon its fascination with the eternal and come to terms with process.

Insofar as the present conjuncture that concerns the contemporary social sciences has to a large extent already been framed as a series of demands for relevance by governmental institutions, funding bodies, and some social researchers (see Chap. 2), however, a reconstruction of their modes of inquiry cannot simply become yet another demand for relevance, nor simply an instrument for producing solutions to prior demands. By contrast, we must begin by taking the concept of relevance seriously and entertain the problematic question of what it is that is demanded when such demands are articulated in practice. In fact, as I will show, although a demand for taking the question of relevance seriously may be welcome and timely, the manner in which such demands are usually framed, as well as their implicit conceptions of what the nature of so-called relevance is and what it requires, seems to me to testify to the problem that this reconstruction must develop. As Dewey (2004: iii) would say, then, the concept of relevance must become the new 'locus from which detailed new developments must proceed.'

Most current demands for relevance implicitly or explicitly associate the term, and the problem it is said to pose, with more and better ways of making scientific practices and products, accountable, communicable, and public. Although I believe questions of public engagement do require attention, in this book I argue that reducing the question of relevance to how the knowledge-practices of the social sciences might make their findings more accessible, engaging, or interesting to a public leaves unexplored a difficult but crucial question. Namely, the question of *how* practices of social inquiry may come to terms with the situated ways in which experiences of various kinds and natures *come to matter*. It is this latter concern—a profoundly speculative one—that will be the object of this book.

In order to do this, I suggest, we need to conceive of relevance not as what belongs to a subjective value ascribed either by a social scientist or a public to the theoretical or empirical findings of social inquiry, but as *an event* that belongs, immanently, to the world. To express that ‘something matters’, that *it* is relevant, is to acknowledge that there is value *beyond ourselves*. The relevance of things, then, cannot be reduced to a judgement that is *passed on* to them, but must be seen as inhering in the situated specificity of the many existences that compose the world (see Chap. 2).

In other words, if it be capable of guiding a reconstruction, ‘relevance’ cannot be simply conceived as a solution to a pre-existing problem. Rather, it needs to be explored as a constraint on thought and practice that is at once problematic and problematising. In this way, the questions that the notion of relevance poses will force us to interrogate the manners in which the contemporary social sciences come to terms with the many heterogeneous facts and values that compose the worlds such sciences address. Simultaneously, it will prompt us to speculate, to devise propositions, for how such a coming-to-terms might be transformed.

Nevertheless, to say that ‘relevance’ is not itself a solution to a pre-existing problem must not be taken to mean that it opposes *any* solution. Rather, its problematic and problematising character forces us to take seriously that, as Mariam Fraser (2010: 78) suggests, ‘there is no true solution to a problem (although there are true problems). [...] The best—and this is indeed the best, in value terms—that a solution can do is to develop a problem’. In short, then, the aim of this book is to engage with ‘relevance’ as a problematic question capable of affecting the ways in which some forms of social inquiry are habitually conducted, and to extract from this process real possibilities that may be cultivated with a view towards future, alternative modes of inquiry.

The precise meaning and implications of the above will become clearer, I hope, as this book proceeds. For now, however, it is worth noting that although the instruments that this kind of reconstruction might produce can be called ‘intellectual’ in that their articulation will be achieved by means of a conceptual exploration of problems and possibilities of certain forms of social inquiry, the change sought is not for that reason to be reduced to the ‘merely’ intellectual or theoretical dimensions that might underpin, contest, or help justify social scientific inquiries.

By contrast, what such a reconstruction aims at is a cultivation of a different set of *ethical sensibilities* to inform social inquiry—a mutation of the *ethos* that animates their modes of knowing, their *habits* of thinking and feeling.² By ethical sensibilities I of course do not mean to say that we are here dealing with codes of good conduct. In fact, the general institutional guidelines that are commonly referred to as ‘research ethics’ will not here be my concern. More than this, what we mean by ‘ethics’ in the context of thinking about and of producing knowledge in the contemporary social sciences will, in the course of this exploration, acquire a radically different meaning. By ethical sensibilities I mean the orientations, the intellectual and practical departments, that both animate and become cultivated through certain practices, and that inextricably entangle certain modes of thinking, certain modes of doing, and certain modes of inhabiting the world.

In other words, I here use the term ‘ethics’ in a sense that may be associated with the works of philosophers like Pierre Hadot (1995) and Michel Foucault (1984a, 1990, 1997a), and which more recently has been taken up, in different ways, by other scholars in social, cultural, and political theory and the history of science. An understanding that aims not at providing a universal, general answer to the anonymous questions of ‘what is the good?’ or ‘what is evil?’, but which rather invites attention to, and care for, an entire ‘mode of existing in the world’ (Hadot 1995: 265). Ethics here concerns in a broad sense the immanent, practical, and situated question of ‘how is one to live?’ A question to which no productive response can be given that does not emerge from a transformative *exercise*—Dewey would have called it a ‘reconstruction’—aimed at cultivating certain modes of care one takes of oneself and of others when involved in practices of thinking, knowing and feeling. As William Connolly (1995: 127) has suggested in his *The Ethos of Pluralization*:

²Throughout this book, the notion of habit is not intended to connote a certain conservativeness. Rather, it is employed in the more neutral sense put forth by Dewey (1922: 66), as ‘an ability, an art, formed through past experience’. Conservativeness is not intrinsic to habit but depends entirely on the character of the habit in question: ‘whether an ability is limited to repetition of past acts adopted to past conditions or is available for new emergencies depends wholly upon what kind of habits exists.’ This is why the work to be developed here is not a fight against habits but an attempt to cultivate different ones.

The ethical point is to struggle against the temptation to allow an existing code of authority or justice to dominate the field of ethics entirely; the ethical idea is to maintain critical tension between a congealed code of authority and justice and a more porous fund of critical responsiveness that might be drawn upon to modify it in the light of contemporary injuries it engenders and positive possibilities it ignores.

Emerging out of the scholarly study of Hellenistic and Roman thought, Foucault's understanding of the ethical question of 'how is one to live?' was concerned with the way in which such exercises involve a work of cultivation directed, first and foremost, toward a transformation of the self upon the self. While Foucault's work has been criticised for its possible overemphasis on the culture of the self (see Hadot 1995; Myers 2013), an overemphasis that bears the danger of turning ethics into a therapeutics, my sense is that such a danger may be avoided by rejecting any clear-cut separation between self and world. Selves are nothing if not ingredients in a world that transcends them. In this way, to induce a transformation of one's own way of existing in the world must also involve a transformation, however modest, of the *world's own manner of existence*.

I will come back to this issue at the end of the book, after the speculative exploration of the question of relevance has been undertaken (see Afterword). But I should note here that insofar as self and world are not to be fundamentally split apart, the question of 'how is one to live?' cannot be dissociated—especially not whenever scientific practices are concerned—from the perhaps narrower question of 'how is one to know?'³ The care of the self, as Foucault would refer to this ethical work upon oneself, involves a care of the world and this, in turn, requires a *care of knowledge*. In fact, it will be this latter interrogation—whose possible responses demand as much practical cultivation as those belonging to the

³This should be not confused with the Western trope of 'know thyself', which both Hadot and Foucault have so dextrously discussed in terms of a care of the self. I should also point out that by posing the question of 'how is one to know?' I am not suggesting that knowledge or cognition is our primary or in any sense privileged mode of relating to the world. Far from it. I am simply highlighting it because it is, after all, a question that very much concerns the sciences, whatever one takes this latter term to mean or include. More accurate however would be to say that the question 'how is one to live?' must involve the question 'how is one to experience?' and that what we call knowledge is a particular form that experience may take.

interrogation about how to live—that I believe the question of relevance has the potential of setting in motion. My contention in this book is that restoring relevance to the world—instead of confining it to the mind—provides crucial resources for cultivating the possibility of a different care of knowledge in the contemporary social sciences.

Contemporary Social Sciences and the Ethics of Inquiry

As Dewey's (2004: xxii) own endeavour makes patently present, a reconstruction is an especially arduous, demanding task that requires 'the widest possible scholarship as to the connections of past systems with the cultural conditions that set their problems and a knowledge of present-day science which is other than that of "popular" expositions.' I read this as a demand to think *with* the very sciences that a reconstruction may seek to affect, to understand their habitual modes of inquiry and to extract from their interstices resources that may serve as tools for guiding their transition into a future that be more than a mere extension of their historical present.

To characterise this reconstruction as 'speculative', that is, as oriented towards the cultivation of a different future that without its intervention might have been harder to imagine or achieve, must not be taken as a sign that it operates by an unconstrained practice of conjecture or guesswork (see Chap. 7). To the extent that it involves the taking of a leap, the risking of a thought that may lead us to a novel experience, it also requires that the ground from which one may jump be taken seriously. So how to take seriously a speculative reconstruction whose ground bears the name of 'contemporary social science'? Is not the latter simply too extensive, complex, heterogeneous, even *disparate*, to serve as a possible ground?

To be sure, the term 'social science' tends to include a multiplicity of disciplines, epistemologies, theories, languages, methodologies, objects and aims, and there is no general consensus as to what the criteria for inclusion or exclusion may be. As John Brewer (2013: 20–21) has recently suggested, most public bodies—such as the UK's Academy of the Social Sciences, the US Social Science Research Council, or the

International Social Science Council (ISSC)—tend to omit definitions of the term even in high-profile reports on the present statuses and futures of such sciences.

The 2013 World Social Science Report (ISSC 2013: 44), for instance, states in a footnote that ‘throughout this Report, and in line with the ISSC’s scientific membership base, reference to the “social sciences” should be understood as including the social, behavioural and economic sciences’, but it does not define what any of these constitute. The website of the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (2014) does offer an extensive list of potential disciplines and post-disciplinary undertakings, ranging from Sociology, Psychology, and Social Anthropology to Linguistics, Law, Management, Economics, and Social History, among others. However, the fact that in their website they also include a video with ‘viewpoints’ on the question of ‘What is social science?’ seems to testify to the fact that no single grouping, however inclusive, will do.

Moreover, if we put the question not only at the level of disciplines but at the level of the epistemologies, theories, languages, and methods that both compose and cut across those disciplines, the chances of a non-arbitrary definition become even slighter. And although at first sight it might appear that despite the aforementioned disparities the objects of inquiry may indeed be shared, including “society” and “humans” as preferred choices, some social scientists have not only contested that these shall constitute appropriate objects for social science, but have also disputed the very fact that something called ‘society’ or ‘humanity’ may be conceived as having any distinct and stable existence (e.g., Haraway 2008; Latour 2005).

In an effort to find a solution to this problem, many of the historiographical and theoretical works that take ‘the social sciences’ as their ground for thought begin precisely by delimiting their frontiers as much as possible. In those instances, the criteria employed for drawing the borders of the social sciences are commonly those of geography and periodicity. Thus, the rise of ‘social theory’ in France between 1750 and 1850 (Heilbron 1995), the co-development of the social sciences and the capitalist world-system from the nineteenth century onwards (Wallerstein 2001), and the emergence and role of the social sciences within an epochal understanding of ‘modernity’ (Wagner 2001) are some of the