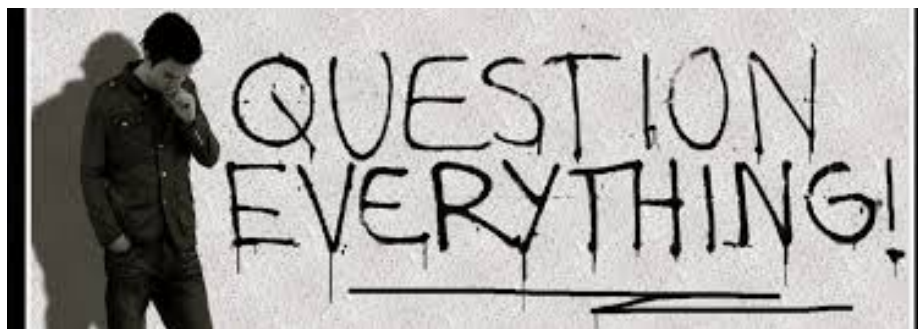


Political Sociology – A Tool to Question Ideologies

MSc student, **Daniela Wulf**, discusses why she studies Political Sociology.



My first tentative encounters with politics occurred rather late in my teenage years and consisted of watching political debates on television. They were imposed upon me as a desperate teacher's measure to fight the acute lack of general knowledge exhibited by his students. Since debates about the latest government policy were not exactly a priority among those who made up my social environment, I was blissfully unaware of much of the world and its problems for a large part of my life. When I decided it was time to see a bit further than the end of my nose, I was irked by how political debate, whether on television, at the dinner table, in the class room or even in parliament, often seemed replete with rhetoric based on rigid ideologies rather than facts. Participants always appeared to find data to support their cause, even when this directly contradicted the data cited by their adversaries. The contradictory nature of the arguments and the pertinacity with which each side defended their position left me confused and dissatisfied.

As a result of my dissatisfaction with ideological debate and after watching *The Green Wave*, a disturbing documentary about the violence against protesters following the 2009 presidential elections in Iran, I became fascinated with those mysterious organisations always referenced on the 8 p.m. news as a source of data on human rights violations. Where did the data come from? Who collected it? How was it analysed? I felt that the answers to such questions would provide me with the tools necessary to challenge the statements made by politicians and teachers and weigh them against each other. In sum, my thought process may have been somewhat akin to a search for "the truth," and even though I no longer believe that there is such a thing as "the truth," it does seem important to have the tools to determine what the truth is *not*.

A good example of when a degree in (political) sociology comes in handy is the following situation, which occurred during my first visit to a new GP in London. During a twenty-minute debate (or monologue) about immigration and the "Islamification of Europe," my GP claimed that roughly 40 percent of Muslims living in London had condoned the 2005 bombings of the underground – "according to a survey." As this figure seemed absolutely outrageous to me, I asked him for his source, but he only told me to "google it." I had just started taking a class in basic statistics, so I went home and googled it (well, ecosia-ed it). My GP apparently referred to a poll conducted by the research company YouGov for *The Telegraph*, which found that 24 percent of those surveyed had "some sympathy with the feelings and motives of those who carried ... out" the attacks (King 2005). Aside from my interlocutor's obvious exaggeration, it is important to note that the original survey question signalled that one can have some sympathy with the feelings of an attacker without believing his or her actions to be justified (YouGov 2005, p.1). Additionally, a survey's generalisability is limited if it is not based on probability sampling. Probability sampling means that each unit in the population (here: all Muslims resident in the UK) must have a non-zero probability of being selected for participation. In the case of the YouGov survey, however, the sample population of 526 Muslim adults living in the UK was drawn from a panel of respondents who "are recruited from a host of different sources, including via standard advertising, and strategic

partnerships with a broad range of websites” (YouGov n.d.). This is potentially problematic because the opinions of individuals recruited in this way might differ from the opinions of others (those without an internet connection, those who visit other types of websites, those not willing to answer surveys). This is not to completely discredit the survey, as demographic bias was eliminated and many surveys are conducted in this way (probability sampling is often impossible). It is just a warning against overestimating the generalisability of statistical information.

Besides going where the data is, questioning ideologies also involves questioning *concepts*. Returning to those mysterious organisations on the 8 p.m. news, one of the most enlightening classes I have ever taken opened up a world of knowledge to me that I feel I should have found earlier and I am ashamed to say I did not. During my bachelor’s degree in languages, I joined a major human rights organisation on a voluntary basis and was thrilled with the work that we did: the information and fundraising events we organised, the letters we wrote urging governments to release political prisoners, the refugee support network that sprung from it. However, taking a class on human rights and post-colonial theory at LSE, I became aware, for the first time in my life, that this thing called “human rights” that had seemed so incontestable and absolute, was, in fact, not so incontestable after all. I began to understand that the same condescending attitude that underpins Westerners’ obsession with the headscarf (“Isn’t it a symbol of oppression?”) seems to run through history like a red thread. From Francisco de Vitoria’s sovereignty doctrine to the invasion of Iraq, the wish to bring “progress” and human rights can have dramatic consequences for those affected. I finally started to take the concept of human rights with a pinch of salt and began to realise the damage that can be done in the name of doing something good. Rather than providing me with answers, the class left me with questions: Does the problem lie with the concept of human rights or its operationalisation? Is the creation of a “truly universal” version as envisioned by Anghie (2005) feasible and justifiable? Although there is no simple answer, only those who are aware of the problematic nature of the ideologies that surround them have the tools to question them in the first place – and I now have these tools.

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