

# A Heterodox Reading of Jayadeva Uyangoda's *Social Research: Philosophical and Methodological Foundations*

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Uyangoda, J (2015), *Social Research: Philosophical and Methodological Foundations*, Social Scientists' Association, Colombo; pp.658, Rs.1800.

It is natural that a lengthy work with a forbidding academic title like *Social Research: Philosophical and Methodological Foundations* would be considered by many as a work that has little relevance outside the narrow populace of academic writers and researchers. This natural inclination would be further strengthened if the book itself is manifestly addressed to future researchers in the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities. It would, however, be a mistake to reduce the significance of Jayadeva Uyangoda's latest publication with the aforementioned title, and also with that explicitly stated intention of serving as an introductory guidebook for researchers in the Social Sciences, to a mere academic text. Let us see why.

At a first glance, it is not difficult to see why such introductions are necessary, especially in the local academic context where it is becoming increasingly rare to find research work worthy of serious consideration or discussion. If this is a suitable diagnosis of the local academic scene in general, this is especially the case in the Social Sciences, where one would be hard pressed to remember even a handful of recent, important researches.

In a certain sense it is not difficult to understand why the Social Sciences would lag behind even the poorly researched field of the Natural Sciences in Sri Lanka. We all have, albeit in an incomplete and vague manner, a certain idea of 'doing research' in the Natural Sciences. In its simplest form it can best be explained as the image of a man – it is always a man and never a woman – wearing a white coat, looking through a microscope, inside a laboratory. No doubt, this is a rather trivial understanding of the way scientific research is conducted, but it is a sufficient one for the point that I wish to make. Simply and crudely, no one can imagine the way research work is conducted in the Social Sciences according to this popular understanding of science and research. The Social Sciences and Humanities are concerned with studying quite different objects such as political states, history, liter-

ature and, of course, society in general. Naturally, it is not possible to imagine any of these 'objects' being studied inside a laboratory framework for the simple reason that they are always-already a part of the researcher's world, making them impossible to be separated from one's subjective experience.

This is why research work in the Social Sciences is intricately bound with philosophical reflections on the methodological approach one adopts with regard to one's field of inquiry – starting from the very distinction between the subjective and the objective. If the working physicists and biologists can continue on with their research without a serious engagement with the philosophical positions one is adopting, this is impossible in the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities. Failure to do so could only result in relegating researches in the Social Sciences to the level of data collection and analysis, a clearly discernible tendency in much of the research work carried out in local academic institutions, as Uyangoda himself notes very early on in the text.

In this context, there is little need to provide a detailed explication of the *raison d'être* for this text. Not only is it an urgent task for all who are seriously engaged in research work in the fields of Social Sciences to read this, but it is also necessary to ensure that this book is given the widest possible critical consideration so that its central message would reach those who are – like in Kafka's famous parable where the man from the countryside waits before the gates of Law, without knowing that the door was always meant to be only for his use – in need of these foundations.

Nevertheless, I believe, it is only if we go beyond this manifest intention of the text can we discover the true significance of this work as a serious contribution to the Sri Lankan discourse on the idea of scientific rationality. Once again, it may be objected that issues concerning the notion of scientific rationality are far removed from the world of socio-political urgencies. Coming as we do from a country

ravaged by a deadly ethnic divide and an economy sinking rapidly in the ideology of neoliberalism, theoretical disputes apropos science and philosophy seem of little relevance to the broader issues we face as a society. However, as Theodor Adorno said in the middle of the last century, when we no longer know how to answer the question ‘what is to be done’, we can only hope to analyze what exists in the most rigorous form that we are capable of.

A few decades ago it was fashionable to proclaim the end of many things – from ‘meta narratives’ of progress and development to the idea of human liberation and History itself. One of the consequences of these ‘discourses of the end’ was that the notion of science itself was challenged as yet another mistaken view of an overly optimistic early modernity. A whole genre of literature challenging the privileged position of science with regard to other domains of knowledge started to proliferate, accusing science of various crimes ranging from Western colonialism and patriarchal domination to ecological crisis. The very mentioning of the word ‘science’ without a qualifying prefix like ‘Western’ was considered to be a taboo on par with the worst atrocities of colonial domination. As a result, not only have we reached a level of collective social agreement where science has been challenged in terms of its superiority over other domains of social concern such as art, but we have become accustomed to accepting any set of beliefs or opinions as equally valid ideas concerning human existence and the world. The problem, however, is that this is not merely a return to a pre-modern dogmatic religiosity but also a strange outcome of modern thinking itself, for it is based on contemporary philosophies and epistemologies that we have been able to criticize the very foundations of our secular modernity. This is, of course, not to say that the various proponents of ‘non-Western sciences’ are all informed by and based on these philosophies. Nevertheless, as the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux perspicuously observed, it is not possible to redeem the philosopher from the responsibility of this return of the religious. The quintessential task in diagnosing this problem is revisiting the philosophies of scientific rationality that can be compared to various other domains. Already, at this level, it is possible to see how Uyangoda’s book can be considered as a response to a general historical tendency: relegating science to the level of religious and mystical discourses.

If this is the general context of this matter in terms of our global politics, then the problem becomes even more serious when one considers the singularities of the Sri Lankan situation. It is well known that the *Jathika Chinthanaya* school that emerged in the mid-1980s has played a key role in the development of contemporary Sinhala nationalism. What is perhaps less known is the unique history of the role played by modern epistemological theories of science in the development of this school of thought. It is indeed Karl Popper’s critique of the scientificity of Marxism that played the central role in the thinking of the leading theoretician of this school, Nalin de Silva. De Silva began his intellectual turn by criticizing the notion of objectivity as a radically separated realm

from the human subjective experience. More than the ideas of Popper, however, it is the works of his student Paul Feyerabend that have been decisive for the specifically nationalist turn of this group. Feyerabend’s theory of science as a set of theories based on particular traditions and accidental discoveries – hence his celebrated claim that ‘anything goes’ in the history of science – was the ground that helped this group to challenge traditional knowledge claims of science as well as the very notions of mind-independent reality. Even though one may find it far fetched, it is not an exaggeration to say that the idea that Sri Lanka should be a country that belongs to the Sinhala-Buddhists, ultimately stems from Feyerabend’s thesis. Simplifying only a little, the argument is something along these lines: if Western science is always based on the Western tradition, it will neither be a desirable nor a suitable form of knowledge for Sri Lanka. The only alternative we have therefore, is to create our own system of knowledge based on our tradition. Naturally, safeguarding what is perceived to be ‘the tradition’ becomes a matter of paramount importance – even if it means war and mass killings.

It is in this context that reading and interpreting the philosophical foundations of modern scientific theories is never simply of an academic interest in Sri Lanka. More than ever, it has become necessary to not only discuss and debate thinkers like Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend, but also the modern tradition of philosophy from which this particular school of thinkers has risen. This, I claim, is the real significance of Uyangoda’s book – a trustworthy guide to the history of the development of scientific reason and various philosophies that have attempted to interpret it from Francis Bacon to Imre Lakatos. Moreover, it has the merit of being written by someone who understands not only the political context of Sri Lanka that I just mentioned but also the requirements of knowledge dissemination. In this latter sense, this book can even be read as an act of love, written by someone who understands his potential readers and the required patience to take them through the perils and pitfalls in this journey.

This takes us to the second reason as to why we should read *Social Research: Philosophical and Methodological Foundations* as a political text. The terrifying intellectual crisis we are facing as a society is, if anything, an open secret. The alarming deterioration of Sri Lankan universities in terms of its knowledge production can no longer be concealed by a shrewd manipulation of statistics and the eternal confusion inherent to the problem of ‘university ranking systems’. It is now a plain fact that we have not only failed to create a new generation of researchers who can systematically engage with knowledge production, but also that we have failed to generate even a single noteworthy scholar during the last two decades. It is no exaggeration to say that what passes for ‘theoretical debates’ in Sri Lanka has become something that is reduced to newspaper articles or, worse, Facebook ‘status updates’. We no longer have many research journals capable of addressing intellectually inclined readers, debating new conceptual developments and taking part in global discussions in the relevant field.

It is hardly necessary to elaborate what the future of a society that does not contain critical thinking, as part of its cultural life, would look like. There are many ways to understand why our natural or spontaneous way of thinking is always controlled by an external agency that ultimately serves the powers that be. Marxists call it ideology. Heideggerians call it the They-self. Most beautifully perhaps, Jacques Lacan summed up the psychoanalytical view: ‘from the Freudian point of view man is the subject captured and tortured by language’. The essential point, however, remains the same – we cannot think critically unless we are willing to take a step back from our natural habitat and understand how this ‘nature’ itself has been constructed. And it is difficult to imagine how a society that collectively fails in this task would survive as a society.

This is, at least for me, the most important gesture of Uyangoda’s book – recognizing the importance of research and creative thinking in theoretical work, mapping the intellectu-

al requirements for this task and, last but not least, introducing and summarizing the most important schools of thought in modern philosophical history. This is why this gesture needs to be upheld and taken to all corners of the country, especially to the alternative spaces and movements where ‘high theory’ and the ‘latest thinkers’ are in high demand.

One of the oldest memories I have of the name Jayadeva Uyangoda is from a blurb on the cover of Sugathapala de Silva’s Sinhala translation of Peter Weiss’s play *Marat/Sade* where he had approvingly quoted the famous words of the character Marat: “the important thing is to pull yourself up by your own hair, to turn yourself inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes”. Almost three decades later, it seems, nothing has changed in Uyangoda’s thinking, except that he has detailed for the Sri Lankan reader the past four centuries of philosophy necessary for this ‘revolutionary turn’, in a manner perhaps unprecedented in Sri Lankan intellectual discourse.

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