

## BASIC METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL SURVEY RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

Svetlana Saykova

**Abstract:** The main thesis of the article is that there is a serious lag in the methodological basis of social survey (SS) research. This lag is with respect to: the grounding and choice of approaches and methods; the criteria for assessing the practical usefulness of the results; their frequently unclarified cognitive potential; the fragmentary way in which the goals and tasks of concrete SS are chosen; the definition of criteria for assessing the produced knowledge and its grounding, etc. There are clear indications that the connection between the empirical and theoretical level of sociological cognition is impaired. The risk this involves lies in the fact that this is not a case of simply (and understandable) underdeveloped empirical knowledge – this is a dangerous trend in the development of SS and of sociological science as a whole. The situation is so serious that some authors see it as something more than “methodological problems”, and call it “methodological chaos” in social surveys.

**Key words:** methodological basis of social survey (SS) research; approaches and methods of social survey research; “methodological chaos” in social surveys; connection between the empirical and theoretical level of sociological cognition; lack of a survey object and of a fundamental body of theory and methodology in sociological science.

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<sup>1</sup> This article continues the discussion on methodological problems of social surveys initiated by the author some 9 years ago. *Study of Factor Correlations in Sociology. Methodological Problems and Solutions* (in Bulgarian) [Saykova, 2005]. The main proposition in that work is that methodological problems of the social survey are treated in a fragmentary way. Whereas here, the issue is discussed in a considerably broader framework and highlights the lack of a survey object and of a fundamental body of theory and methodology in sociological science. The raising of these issues here has been inspired to a considerable degree by the monograph *Sociology, Power and Societies. The Ignorance that Destroys the Worlds of People* (In Bulgarian) [Minev, 2011].

1. The world today is characterized by such a great expansion and intensity of SS in nearly all spheres of life as would have been unthinkable until recently. This fact is quite understandable – the prospects for development of societies, the achievement of a higher quality of life, the solution to important social problems, depends, and will increasingly depend, on the successful social interaction between individuals, social groups, communities, societies. That is why the need to monitor and analyze important social interactions will also grow. As is well-known, the most important tool for this is SS.

1.1. The main functions of empirical sociology include: effectuating reliable monitoring and assessments of the state of the contemporary social world; learning about social dynamics, i.e. the direction in which the world is moving and its factors; assessments of the trajectories and parameters of this movement; discovering and clarifying the significant social problems; studying the degree of dissemination of social pathologies and their causes and consequences; warning society in time as regards the eventual risks and dangers that menace it. It is also important to assess the social effectiveness of the expended social resources and, of course, to promote the development of scientific knowledge about the social world that surrounds us. Today societies spend very large resources (in terms of funds, materials, social time, and human efforts), so it is imperative to assess the real efficacy of these expenditures.

In order to avoid possible misunderstanding, I will point out at the start that I do not ascribe the shortcomings (mentioned below) of the methodological solutions and formulations provided by SS to the personal oversights and failures of researchers (though such failings certainly do occur, the author herself not being ensured against them) but to causes that go beyond these personal factors. I should also point out that the critical assessments made below do not imply I underestimate the real achievements of empirical research in sociology – but these are not the topic of our discussion here.

1.2. In order to obtain truly significant (socially useful) findings, SS need to have their methodology developed. This is an area, however, in which there is an observable lag and delay. What is it that hampers our achieving this development at a faster rate and more successfully? One serious obstacle is that, in the science of sociology, despite its more than a century of development, the basic and most important questions have not yet been resolved. This refers to lack of clarity and clear definition of the subject of sociology; to a lack of a body of theory (a general theory of the discipline) and, consequently, to a lack of a fundamental methodological core underlying the cognitive efforts of sociological research.

S. Mihaylov has defined the methodology of sociology as “a system of theories used as guiding principles and rules when conducting sociological analysis and making generalizations in the preparation and conducting of social surveys” [Mihaylov, 1996]. But what sort of system of theories could this be? The amount and variety of approaches and methods in sociology is inconceivably large and incapable of serving as a basis for defining fundamental principles and rules; even less, for connecting these in a coherent system. There are dozens

of theories and approaches used in social surveys: they include functionalism, structuralism, social morphology, ethnomethodology, the systems approach, symbolic interactionism, methodological individualism, behaviourism, and many others. The variety is equally great as regards the methods and techniques used in collecting and analyzing sociological information: these include quantitative methods (primarily statistical ones, but others as well); methods of analysis of sociological information that cannot be expressed in quantitative terms (these are mechanically interpreted as “qualitative methods”); monographic methods (for instance case studies), content analysis, sociometric methods in the study of small groups; models and methods for designing samples (representative and non-representative), and many others. The polyparadigmatic principle in sociology legitimizes all of these methods. Normally, there would be nothing irregular in this. The problem is that the results of the study of one and the same object, even when based on the same empirical information about that object, are hard to harmonize between the various paradigms. The results are in many cases even contradictory and unconvincing. On top of that, methodology lacks generalized criteria for the assessment of the validity and logical coherence of these results<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, there is still no shared view or understanding even about the fundamental notion of methodology itself. All too scarce are the comparative analyses dealing with the cognitive capacities, advantages and limitations of the different methods commonly used by scientists. In many cases, clear criteria are lacking for the assessment of the reliability and validity of the achieved results. All this represents an obstacle to the formation of a fundamental methodological core for empirical (and theoretical) social surveys, though such a core is a requirement that every scientific discipline sets itself.

**1.3.** It is an obvious fact that the methodological core of every science is part of its methodology, and the most important part at that. The lack of such a core cannot be compensated for in any way, and, naturally, is unfavourable to the success of scientific research.

Indeed, if we do not know what the object is, what a given science (in this case, sociology) will investigate, how can we know the way to go about investigating it? When we talk about the lack of a basic theoretical or methodological body, we primarily have in mind the lack of a general theory of sociology, the uncoordinated starting principles of sociology, upon which it is built, the tasks to be achieved, the most important elements of the theory and the classification of these elements, the basic approaches and methods for producing sociological knowledge. We also have in mind the connections between the different areas and levels of the social, including of sociological cognition – above all, the connections between empirical and theoretical levels of cognition, the assessments

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<sup>2</sup> I am not referring to lack of criteria of the validity of assessments drawn from representative samples, but to the lack of generally shared criteria.

of the validity of the obtained results, the place and role of sociology among the other social sciences.

The fact that the questions we are discussing here are insufficiently illuminated and still unresolved demonstrates the lack of a general sociological theory, a lack that seems unexplainable. It is generally held that there is no such general theory to date. And it is indeed hard to explain why, after more than a hundred years, not only a general theory, but even a fundamental theoretical core has not been constructed. Moreover, more than a few researchers deny the need for, and even the possibility to build a general sociological theory. Robert Merton assumes that it is only possible to create sociological theories at a middle range – for instance, at the level of economic sociology, sociology of law, etc. J. Szacki asserts that a theory is not at all necessary for conducting sociological surveys – “standard techniques” is all that is required [Minev, 2011]<sup>3</sup>! Instead of general foundations of sociological science, researchers in this field are being offered an overwhelming amount of theories (in the framework of polyparadigmatic, dialogical sociology, etc.). The same is true as regards the fundamental body of methodology. Instead of the missing fundamental core, methods and techniques are being put into scientific use that, not infrequently, produce insufficiently justified and contradictory results.

The trouble is not that there are so many different methods for the study of social reality. Such a variety is necessary to some degree. The trouble is that they are not connected and systematized under a common methodological framework. A number of important classifications are lacking. There is a shortage of criteria for choosing a methodology to resolve different types of cognitive tasks. If our task is to study the causes and factors that generate growing social pathologies, how can we be sure in our choice of adequate approaches and methods for achieving this task? Also, the cognitive capacities of many of the methods have not been sufficiently clarified. In brief, generalizations are lacking with regard to the approaches and methods used, and these have not been connected in a fundamental methodological core, in a logically grounded system. As an example, I will point out that even within the framework of the statistical approach (which is fundamental in social surveys) the cognitive tasks and limitations of many of its respective methods have not been clarified – not in general but with respect to the specific tasks of social surveys – and its connections with, and differences from other approaches are not considered.

## 2. The consequences of this situation

The consequences can be nothing but negative, in several aspects: a) social surveys are deprived of real criteria regarding the choice of research methods for concrete research tasks and frameworks; b) many good opportunities are lost with respect to generalizing results at different levels of generalization and when passing from the empirical to the theoretical level of knowledge; c) significant criteria for assessing the genuine scientific achievements in this sphere

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<sup>3</sup> See *Sociology, Power and Societies. The Ignorance that Destroys the Worlds of People* (In Bulgarian) [Minev, 2011: 211].

are lacking; d) the situation is detrimental to the development of sociological methodology in general. Thus, it is not surprising that many authors talk about “methodological anarchy” and chaos in the choice of approaches and methods in social surveys. And such qualifications are not groundless. Ultimately the situation reduces the capacity of sociology to perform its important functions, pointed out at the beginning of this article.

The damage thereby done to sociology and social practice can be classified in several basic groups:

**2.1.** Enormous amounts of empirical data drawn from surveys have been amassed and are constantly accumulating. This would be a good thing if the data could be analyzed and generalized adequately, and if the analyses could offer more useful results corresponding to society’s expectations. The problem is that, due to the causes pointed out above, this is rarely the case. Without establishing sufficient links between the separate fact-finding studies of a given social phenomenon it would be hard to make generalizations, identify the trends and regularities, assess the factor impacts and the internal and external connections relevant to the objects of study.

**2.2.** The unjustified fragmentation of survey methodology has long been noticed. Until recently this seemed to me to be due primarily to the slow generalization of methodological achievements. In our country, and in other countries, it is becoming increasingly clear that not only is the generalization of methods and approaches characterized by an unjustified fragmentariness, but the scope of survey topics is also unjustifiably narrow, which is no less alarming.

I will point out at least a few examples in support of this assertion. The topics of social surveys today persistently fail to include such important problems as the monitoring and analysis of social dynamics, the tracing of the trajectory of dynamics and the assessment of its parameters. The factors of social changes are not studied adequately. A number of authors have written about this, as early as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. R. Boudon (1969) reported that some significant problems were starting to disappear from the circle of topics of social surveys (the notable thing in this statement is that they had been present but begin to disappear. Boudon pointed out as an example the disregard for the social causes of social changes and social crises. At about the same time H. Blalock wrote that “the problems of collecting adequate data in dynamic rows (data for dynamics analysis) seem so great that we collectively postpone the moment of starting a serious discussion on how to organize and solve this problem” [Blalock 1968: 79]. Two decades later the same author found no perceptible advance had been made in this direction. And even now, an additional half century later, we can again say that no particular progress has been made in the study of social dynamics. What could this mean? Simply, that serious efforts have not been made in empirical research in sociology, and that perhaps the capacity is lacking to observe and assess the direction in which the social world is moving, the track it is on, and where societies are headed for today.

The logical conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that sociology today would find it difficult to ascertain the parameters of an eventual trend of deviant social dynamics, to warn society of possible risks and menaces, and to offer adequate defense strategies. Some examples of this are the social economic crises, the wars that, contrary to expectation, did not end with the fall of the Berlin Wall but continue to arise here and there. Another example is the world-wide debt crisis of 2008, which proved even longer and graver than the crisis of 1929-33. Also, in the welfare societies, the quality of life, which had been continually rising after World War II, reversed its trend after the 1970s. Instead of continuing in the direction they took after 1945, today inequality levels are rising more than ever; as a result, so are poverty levels. From the viewpoint of the interests of most societies, J. Stiglitz [Stiglitz, 2012] examines and reveals the harmful impact of the enormous levels of inequality in the USA (and elsewhere). Inequality is a sure indicator of deviant social dynamics. The crisis that began in 2008 revealed one other thing – that the debt crisis did not begin then, but had been prepared for nearly 30 years and that the symptoms of its imminent advent had been accumulating. Yet no signals of this had been given by sociological research. Not only in our country, but in developed countries alike, there have been no assessments of the losses societies are sustaining from this evidently deviant trend of social dynamics. The task of empirical research in sociology is to provide a timely monitoring and to warn societies about the trends and consequences – but sociology is evidently not working in this respect.

**2.3.** There are also very few studies and assessments as to the effects and consequences of public policies and programmes. M. Brewer [Minev, 2011] asserts that programmes for social intervention of the government are meant “to cure social ailments or to promote social change.” But are they really doing this? Are they promoting the positive social changes and the progress of societies? These questions await well-grounded answers from sociological researchers.

D. Minev [Minev, 2011] has shown that, despite the development of the so-called assessment studies in recent years, there is a lack of really serious estimates of the impact of public policies and social intervention programmes. In the last two decades such intervention programmes have been conducted in our country as well, and enormous public funds are spent on them. For example, there is the programme for development of the administrative capacity of the public administration, or the programmes for developing small and middle business, for fighting unemployment, for integrating the Roma ethnic group, for improving the education system, for health care; there are many more.

Our society is not informed as to the real effects of these programmes, because assessments of the effects are simply non-existent. (The kinds of assessments that have been made are such as usually emphasize mainly, or uniquely, the successes achieved; in other words, realistic assessments are missing, and the ones presented in public space are often of suspect quality.) Social surveys are keeping silent on these issues – this silence is hard to account for and under-

stand. Who else, if not sociologists, should observe what is going on in our social world as a whole and should assess the results of the actions of the groups in power? This conclusion holds true equally for the social surveys conducted with state funding or with resources from the European funds. Certainly, very large resources are spent on them, but there are no generalized assessments as to how effective these expenditures are.

**2.4.** It may rightly be said that the capacity of sociological surveys to analyze cause-and-effect and other correlations in social phenomena and processes is, to put it mildly, very reduced; not rarely, it is nil. This is true with regard to nearly all fields in which social surveys are conducted.

More than a few researchers estimate that social surveys are “permanently ensconced” within the boundaries of description and interpretation of empirical data. They use quite a rich array of methods, approaches, tools and research techniques, but since all these are not interconnected within an integral methodological system, the results obtained through them do not lend themselves to serious interpretation and generalization. Moreover, when the same data are interpreted and explicated, mutually contradictory conclusions are often proposed. The conception that sociology is a polyparadigmatic science greatly increases the probability that this will happen – according to this conception, all approaches, and all methods, are permissible and useful in this field.

**2.5.** Essentially, there are no serious investigations on research methods, methods, and instruments. For instance, what are the criteria for assessing the results of social surveys based on ethnomethodology or on most of the so-called qualitative methods. The same question may be asked with respect to in-depth interviews. I am not claiming such methods are unnecessary, but am stressing the need for developing well-grounded criteria for assessing each of them.

I will give an example. Several years ago the National Centre for Public Opinion Study (NCPOS) was given the task of conducting a nation-wide representative social survey. People’s opinions and assessments were sought regarding the national programme ‘From Social Assistance to Ensuring Employment’. Over half a million leva were spent on this programme. The generalized results obtained by NCPOS were approximately the following: “54% of respondents assess this programme as successful; 70-80% have some idea as to what this programme is; 2/3 of the poor and unemployed have assessed it as fair”, etc. It is not clear by what criteria the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has selected this way of assessing the efficacy of its own social programme. Are there any reliable criteria at all regarding its genuine results? If there have been such results, what information has reached the public about them? What have been the responses to this information? I will add that the criteria have been similar with regard to the choice of methods used in assessing the efficacy of many other programmes funded by Bulgarian public or European funds.

**2.6.** Against this backdrop, there does not seem to be a clear vision about the priority directions of social survey research in our country. In this situation, very large and vitally important social problems remain outside the scope of

sociology. And the vision as to what the priorities should be, and what activities should be allotted public funds for social surveying, cannot be left to private social survey agencies. Due to the various goals pursued by scientific institutions, this is a task for scientists from the field of sociology.

Here is one disturbing example. Why has the ministry referred to above set the task of estimating the structure of the population, with a stress on the Roma ethnic group? How to go about ascertaining the size of this minority? This particular task has been assigned to a consortium of several organizations. But it is well-known that this should properly be a job not for a consortium formed ad hoc, and not for sociology, but for the National Statistical Institute. It would appear that in the 2011 population census NSI has not done its job and now the task should be shifted to other institutions – without any reasonable explanation being given for this judgement. And what will be the cost for public funds? Is the task achievable by a team selected in this way? These and many other questions are connected with the principles and criteria for choice of topics, approaches and methods of research on socially significant problems in our society, in other words, with the rational choice of topics and with the proper ranking of topic priorities when financing research from public funds.

**2.7.** The shortcomings and oversights in the choice of methodological solutions for concrete social surveys are definitely harmful as regards assessing the real results, the real usefulness for society, and the social significance of those surveys. Are the criteria by which we assess the usefulness sufficient? And how are those criteria applied? To what extent do the topics and obtained results really correspond to the subject of sociology per se? But if the topic itself is vague, not clear, not definite, then how can there be a clear criterion about it at all? And if there is no clear vision and consensus regarding the priority tasks of SS in a given field, then how can we select the topics and tasks to be given priority funding? How can we justify and offer to the leaders of social management the right criteria for a priority choice of topics for social surveys? These are all questions for empirical and theoretical sociology that await grounded answers.

**2.8.** When discussing the lack of a fundamental methodological core in SS, we logically come to the issue of evaluating the merits of researchers with regard to monitoring, analyses and assessments of the developments taking place in the surrounding social world, and to the criteria whereby we assess the scientific results attained by research teams. Clearly, if such criteria are lacking, valid assessments of the results cannot be made. To some extent, this explains why, instead of assessing and stressing the real scientific and practical contributions of individual researchers, we stubbornly cling to criteria such as “number of publications abroad”, “number of citations in foreign publications”, “number of participations in forums abroad”, etc. These bibliometric assessments in themselves are insufficient as a yardstick for scientific contributions, though they might in some cases be indicative of such.

**2.9.** We also find some ambiguous, “dispersed” interpretations and explanations, though based on the same empirical data. S. Cole gives examples of

how, from the same empirical data, researchers effortlessly draw arbitrary conclusions that serve mutually contrary, chiefly ideological, interests. S. Pinker goes even further, asserting that “downright nonsense”, which claims to be scientific, is being published. Examples of this are the theses of contemporary “theorists” that it is not possible, and not even necessary, to construct a general sociological theory. Nisbet attempts to make us believe that social dynamics are an “illusion”, whereby he altogether disregards the development of civilization. According to him, it is unthinkable and pointless to study “non-existent things”. “No dynamics – no problem” is quite in tune with the well-known, sinister phrase “no man – no problem”. Venerable sociologists try to convince us that wars, social and economic crises have positive effects (for instance, they are said to open perspectives for renewal and progress, to easily unite and mobilize society). But no one comments on the question in whose interest and at what cost people are united for participation in wars. In our country, we also come across statements that can hardly be judged by common sense criteria. A well-known Bulgarian professor of sociology assures us: “The second great problem of students in sociology is that these [he probably means their teachers – author’s note] are people who have never had higher education present in their family traditions” [Dimitrov, 2011: 296-297]. So what? Putting aside the fact that in a family there cannot be “higher education” but only persons with a higher education, we wonder what the author is trying to convince us of? “If socially marginal people produce socially marginal people, the same author enlightens us, then why do we complain that sociology is disappearing?” From this viewpoint Lomonosov was a social marginal<sup>4</sup>. Another Bulgarian sociologist asserts: “We are those who can introduce complexity in the interpretation and solution of various problems of society” [Dimitrov, 2011: 318]. It is not clear why it is necessary to “introduce complexity” in our surveys. Is it not more natural to strive to do the opposite? Many more examples drawn from Bulgarian and foreign authors can be given, but this is not necessary. The ones cited above eloquently show what happens when genuine criteria of the validity and significance of survey results are missing.

**2.10.** Sociologists have displayed meager interest in how public resources are spent at the global level today. There is reason to claim that in our country and abroad empirical sociological research is not perceptibly involved in the monitoring and assessment of the real social effectiveness of expenditure in various spheres of activity. The question might arise whether such assessments are not a task only for economists. Hardly so! It is very well-known that economic effectiveness and rationality are not always equal to social effectiveness and rationality – the former might only be part of the latter. What is traditionally assessed as economically effective and expedient might prove far from socially effective. So let us leave it to economists to assess economic effectiveness. It is the task of sociologists to assess social effectiveness of results of activities in

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<sup>4</sup> As well as Zahari Stoyanov, who was illiterate until the age of 21.

general and in separate sectors, in order to ascertain the real benefits for society derived from respective expenditure. Society has the right to know what it gains, what it loses, and what possible gains it misses when expending resources for the production of material and cultural values, for administrative services, healthcare, education, environmental protection, etc. At general societal level no one can perform this important task of assessment but sociologists. The task also involves monitoring and assessment of the overall effectiveness of scientific research and, we might add, of the enormous number of social surveys being conducted.

**2.11.** The unsolved problems that we are discussing here lead to a dangerous rupture between the integral interaction of empirical and theoretical knowledge in sociology. When this rupture continues for long, it leads to disintegration and breakdown of science. D. Minev [Minev, 2010] writes: “We can point out at least two effects of the broken connection [between empirical and theoretical – author’s note]. The first is the appearance of serious difficulties for empirical studies, which suffer particularly much from the lack of adequate theoretical support and are particularly affected by the results this engenders. Due to the missing connection with an adequate theory, data are produced that can hardly be interpreted adequately”. Much of the empirical data have meanings so multiple that they practically lose their cognitive value. The second effect is that this situation “... forces those working in the field of survey methodology to try and somehow deal with the situation by personally taking care of the task of providing a satisfactory methodology for their work...” But they do not – and cannot – commit themselves to creating the missing theoretical and methodological cores<sup>5</sup>.

The efforts of methodologists in this direction could not possibly be successful, simply because they would be “putting the cart before the horse”. Instead of building methodology upon a solid theoretical foundation, the order is reversed: methodologists are doing the work of the theorists, which is hardly the best solution.

**2.12.** By now it is hard to deny the “methodological anarchy” that exists in sociology. To all appearances, the efforts made (consciously or not) to overcome this anarchy are very insufficient. It would be more precise to say that no serious efforts are in fact being made at present to create a fundamental methodological core. Undoubtedly, this is a task for sociology, and one of priority importance at that.

**2.13.** Due to the lack of systematized assessments on the methods of analysis and the poor knowledge about their real potential, they are not always used to their full capacity and properly in SS. The good opportunities that exist for making more generalized and better-grounded conclusions are also not being used. I will give just two examples: a) when interpreting and assessing empirical data, it is often not clear to us when the requirements of pro-

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Path from Empirical Research to Theory: Why a Central Body of Theory Is Missing and Why It Is Necessary* (in Bulgarian) [D. Minev, 2010].

bability theory should be observed and when they are not needed for making valid conclusions and generalizations; b) the popular case study method, in my opinion, has a much greater potential for illuminating some interesting social processes and phenomena, but it is not being used sufficiently at present. This method is a good means for revealing new trends at an incipient stage, the emergence of good practices, as well as the hidden factors of various social pathologies. It can be used to identify schemes and mechanisms of social action aimed against the public interest – for instance, mechanisms (schemes) for draining Value Added Tax, or offences against personal or public property, or the corrupt practices of civil servants and politicians. Such applications of case studies would be of great benefit to society and particularly to our justice system.

**2.14.** The missed opportunities testify to a strongly reduced capacity of SS to reveal the signs of what might eventually become deviant social dynamics, to give timely warning about the risks and dangers for society. It was mentioned above that sociologists in developed societies failed to notice the coming debt crisis of 2008. Bulgarian sociologists have also not performed their social task in this respect. Also, no serious analyses and assessments have been made about the events in our country after 1989. Sociologists did not try and did not succeed in foreseeing the risks involved in public policies and the damages to the economy and to the social development of the country in the years of transition: with respect to the breakdown of the productive capacity of industry, of agriculture, of trade, the collapse of the healthcare system, the damage done to education, to science, and to many other spheres.

**2.15.** It is interesting to observe the attitude of the present-day ruling elites towards sociological (and more generally social) research. D. Minev quotes the American sociologist D. Messey, who asserts: “We are living in times of exceptional hostility towards science, displayed at all levels of American society”. Messey has in mind the hostility towards social sciences and sociology in particular. In full harmony with this attitude are the efforts of a Bulgarian government to “restructure” – but in fact to abolish – the functions of the social sciences and of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS). We know all too well what strong political pressure was brought to bear and the unprecedented, stifling financial restrictions on research in BAS institutes, restrictions that are continuing even now. The government’s negative attitude towards social research has been expressed openly, with arrogance and cynicism. And this is hardly accidental. The centres of power do not like it when sociology reveals the dark sides of government and the damage done by various public policies. This attitude has continued since the start of the transition and to this day. Not long ago, a financial minister baldly stated that he knew how to deal with the scientific institutes of BAS<sup>6</sup>. In harmony with this approach, the Minister

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<sup>6</sup> “When we stop its funding, BAS will break down of itself”. This is what this minister assured us, publicly stating this view with respect to the social sciences as well.

of Education of that administration “assessed” that “there are too many philosophers in our country”!<sup>7</sup>

As D. Minev puts it, underlying all this is something long familiar: the eternal conflict between government and knowledge. The strategic principle of the people in power is that “the active maintenance of ignorance is something positive for the established social order”. This refers to the social world and to the actual effects of government policies. The true aim of this arrogant attitude towards the social sciences is to preserve the status quo of power at all costs.

### 3. A few conclusions

The discussions on the dangerously advanced harmful effects resulting from the lack of a proper object and body of theory and methodology in SS suggest several important things.

**3.1.** The capacity of sociology to deal with the tasks that society expects of it is extremely reduced: this has become so obvious that few people doubt it now.

**3.2.** There is a need for increased interest and active research activity for identifying and building the basic methodological core of SS. This task is connected with indispensable, essential needs of society. The objectives are: to provide methodological theories, define principles and rules of surveys in sociology; to make analyses and generalizations aimed at clarifying the criteria for the choice of approaches and methods in SS (depending on the specific cognitive tasks); to provide critical analysis, generalizations and systematization of the actually applied approaches and methods, as well as to define techniques for identifying the scope and limits of the cognitive potential of these methods; elaborating a more integral theory on errors in SS; systematizing the approaches used, the problems of modelling in sociological surveys; etc.

**3.3.** The tasks of elaborating a general view and conception as to the thematic priorities in SS should be pursued in dialogue with the state administration so that the distribution of public funds for research may be more expedient and effective. Among the priority fields I would list: monitoring and assessment of social dynamics, their trajectory and parameters; analyses of social risks and dangers for society; expert evaluations on public policies relative to the envisaged programmes for social intervention and, more generally, to the political decisions and the real effects resulting from them; assessment of the dimensions and harm of current social pathologies; the relations between producers and consumers, between traders and their clients (in order to reveal the changes taking place in their relations and the mechanisms and schemes applied to deceive and cause losses to the consumer). There is an acute need for sociological monitoring and assessments of the harm done to society by the aggressive advertising industry. This is also true as regards assessments on expenditure of public funds and their real benefits/harms for society (with an emphasis on how, where, and for what, public funds are squandered).

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<sup>7</sup> But he did not explain by what criterion he made this categorical estimate. Perhaps there are not enough Egyptologists in our country – who knows?

**3.4.** Along with representative samples, one of the important approaches used for gathering empirical sociological data are the non-representative samples. They deserve to be the object of greater interest, with an emphasis on their cognitive potential, limitations and the risks of error they hold, and on ascertaining when it is expedient to apply them.

**3.5.** The approaches and methods of analyzing causal and other connections and impacts also deserve much greater emphasis than they are currently being given. Despite their limitations, the existing methods can be used by researchers far more productively than is the case at present. This refers, for instance, to the “from effects to causes” approach and the “from causes to effect” approach. The same is true for the indirect methods based on the black box principle, and many others. Special attention should be devoted to the possibilities of using experimental research in SS.

**3.6.** And finally, if it is true that formal, and especially informal, networks are mechanisms for conducting social interaction, then they also deserve to be included as priority topics of SS.

**3.7.** A comparatively new and very promising (much less costly and more topically relevant) information source for SS is the Internet social networks. The use of data drawn from them also requires accelerated search for its methodological basis.

I see this discussion of the methodological problems of SS as a proposal to expand the productive professional debates aimed at illuminating these problems and seeking alternatives for their solution. It is also an appeal to the sociological community for more active resistance against the attempts to underestimate or abolish the useful role of sociology for society.

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Correspondence address:

**Svetlana Saykova** – Prof. DSc  
Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge  
Social Survey Research Center  
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences  
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria, 13A Moskovska Str.  
Phone: 0885 653 450  
e-mail: sseykova@gmail.com