

On Prediction in the Social Sciences

While the natural sciences can predict with accuracy and precision many kinds of phenomenon such as, for example, solar eclipses, economists and sociologists are unable to provide any certain and detailed forecasts of social dynamics. Why is this so? Following Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek, it can be argued that this is because of three reasons: (i) the lack of deterministic laws of human action; (ii) the fact that relevant social phenomena are mainly extremely open complex systems; and (iii) the existence of unintended consequences of human action that affect historical and social processes. Given the above, what can be said about the idea that the reason why the prediction of social phenomena is problematic is because the social sciences are less advanced than natural ones? According to Popper and Hayek, this idea is a prejudice that stems from the fact that we often tend to mistakenly compare what should not be compared, i.e. on one hand highly unpredictable complex social systems and on the other very predictable simple (and often artificial) physical systems. It must be acknowledged that even in physics it is impossible to predict in detail the behavior of a very open complex system.