

EMPOWERING INSTITUTIONS: A CASE FOR CONNECTING BUSINESS AND THE ACADEME THROUGH *PHRONESIS*

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Abstract. Arguably World War II had a fundamental and profound impact on the Western culture, practices and institutions. One central feature of this impact was the disillusionment with the capacity of social sciences to help policymakers improve society. The past 60 or so years have seen a major crisis of identity throughout the disciplines of social science. On one hand, positivism stood on the premise that the war was a result of irrational and pseudoscientific totalitarian social theories; on the other hand, post-modernist (and various other “postisms”) raised doubts about the possibility of social science being something more than just another variation of totalitarian ideology. This polarization has seen animated polemic and methodological confrontation with seemingly no victors. As a result, social science as a whole lost its reputation as a credible source of knowledge for successful action. A strand of social science reformers in various disciplines are trying to build alternative definitions of what social science ought to constitute which would accommodate claims of both warring sides. However, persuasive as these integrative attempts may be, such ideas are having a hard time of becoming the mainstream of social science. By borrowing from institutionalist perspectives, this paper constructs an argument that the reason for the lack of relevance of social science in business and policy is not so much a methodological weakness of the science as it is the incompatibility of institutionalized interest between business and the academe.

Keywords: Phronetic Social Science, Institutionalism, Positivism, Structure-agency Problem, Applied Social Research, Institutional Inertia.

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1. Introduction

Herbert Simon, a political scientist by training who earned the Nobel Prize in Economics (1978) for a study in what essentially can be attributed to management and/or public administration studies and later expanded on his work by contributing to computer sciences and cognitive psychology, is a person whose work transcends disciplines and all disciplines are honoured to having him as one of their own. But at the same time his case is illustrative of the gross inadequacy of any organizational arrangements in social science that are based on subject matter. The very core of the added value of the work of a social scientist is the novelty of finding connections between social phenomena that were not known previ-

ously. And this cannot possibly be helped by framing his inquiry within a discipline. Yet, if the statement above is possible to have broad agreement on, why is it that scientific disciplines persist? Norkus (2008) suggests that formation of social science disciplines is contingent upon the needs of policy makers of other founders of academic institutions. Modern social science disciplines, such as political science, were only possible under democracy to study democracy; economics was needed only after capitalism was there to be studied and so on. However, once a discipline is established, it cannot be easily dissolved. There are several attempts at explaining why the phenomenon of institutional inertia occurs. Most of these explanations are variations upon a classical social science problem of structure-agency relation. This paper

claims that the institutionalization of a scientific discipline comes not only with a name but also with an agenda. And this agenda over time may start to significantly differ from the needs of the outside society. Consequently, the argument why businesses, policy-makers and the academe might not be able to find a common language is not the disparities in opinion among academicians on the issues of methodology, epistemology or ontology but, rather, disparities among the interest of academic and other institutions, which may be so deep seeded that become unreflected and therefore almost impossible to uproot.

2. “Schizophrenia” of Social Science: Structure-Agency Problem

Simon in his 1947 (1997) study says that social science can be suspected of being schizophrenic. On one hand it describes history as grand schemes which become reality because they are of superior rationality compared to other scenarios. Here individuals have no power to affect history and can only act rationally in-step with events or be swept away by them. On the other end of the spectrum lie Freudian interpretations that all human action is irrational, driven by instincts and therefore early childhood experience events are radically unpredictable.

Simon himself has sided with the determinist camp. For him rationality is a measurable element of social reality. In the broadest sense adherents to this approach can be called positivists. Positivism for Simon was a must for social science if it were to become relevant in the true sense of the term “science”. In 1946 Simon attacked administrative theory as being a methodologically unsound arena for production of proverbs, which often are contradictory and do not represent scientific knowledge. The method he called for was the one borrowed from natural sciences which saw social reality only as a more complex extension of the natural world. For positivists the reason why there is a lack of precision in measurement and predictions of social science research is an issue of technology, which in turn is an issue of time.

But positivism had always had its discontents. The issue at the heart of positivist and anti-positivist debates can be traced to the question of human subjectivity. The most radical idea that renounced human subjectivity can be attributed to the 18th century French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace who suggested that if it were possible to know all the posi-

tions of all atoms at any one time, it would also be possible to calculate all the past and future events. The system that would have such ability would be all-knowing. This deterministic approach that has become known as Laplace’s demon is no longer considered feasible (Waldner 2002). Yet even if determinism in Laplacean terms is not the endgame for science, the idea that human subjectivity can be objectivized is still an issue at large.

Empirically testing the idea that subjectivity is only possible when there is “the Other” is a tricky issue because we as persons live in the world filled with others. Yet, in terms of interpersonal relations the impossibility to transcend the “abyss of the Other” is at the core of our subjectivity (Žizek *et al.* 2006). Paradoxically by becoming objective we inevitably subjectivize the other and *vice versa*. Science as an institution can similarly be accused of being able to exist only within a similar paradox on an inter-institutional level. According to Žizek, “objective” scientific knowledge is only possible in a society which accepts “irrational” God (Žizek *et al.* 2006).

The problem for positivism can be summarized by the fact that separating objects and subjects in social inquiry is next to impossible because the researcher can never rise above the society, he is lodged in it himself and therefore is always subject to “double contingency” (Luhmann 1995).

Double contingency manifests itself through the inability of individual to know the true motives of his counterpart in any interaction (Luhmann 1995). Therefore, one is always immersed in the idle attempts to interpret what the other means when he or she says or does something. The positivist solution to this problem is the attempt to measure and quantify behaviour (Bryman 2008). Yet, the value of such knowledge is of little use in everyday practice. Thus, we are faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem. According to one approach, human motivations arise in the closed system of ego and alter ego of the human psyche (and constitute *human agency*) and both are unpredictable and irrational (Luhmann 1995). Conversely, the “scientific” approach to social reality can only observe and generalize behaviour in the belief that broader social forces (social *structure*) ultimately determine human action.

The structure/agency debate can be considered the core question for social theory which has characterized the academic debate throughout the history of

modern social science (Ritzer 2008). The modernization of society is a complex process that continues to fascinate historians. It has ushered a variety of structural changes in society, such as leisure, urbanization, nationalism, capitalism and the pursuit of efficiency which is driven by and drives itself technological advance. All these are features of a society not known in the millennia of human existence before. Social theories that attempted to explain this unprecedented development had their work cut out for them trying to find the underlying causes for this. And the major question that structured academic debate was whether modernization was inevitable or was it a coincidence? And there were plenty of theories that pulled the rope either way: agency centred theories saw the explanation in the action of great visionaries and historical contingency while structuralists sought to switch the hen and the egg by claiming that modernization was an inevitable outcome of history and geography and that personalities that actually are associated with particular events had little more than instrumental role to play in this process. And it was only comparatively recently (past 30 years) that social theorists dissatisfied with the inability of either approach to resolve outstanding issues attempted to construct alternative approaches in order to come to some sort of unifying solution (Ritzer 2008). The works of the likes J. Habermass, A. Giddens, N. Elias have offered theories which tried to reflect upon the social process not as being determined by either the structure or agency but as a process that is driven by complex interaction between the two. And invariably they all gave some credit to the capacity of human agency to affect the outcomes of social events albeit in a limited way.

This implies that the human agency has capacity to act strategically. And for businesses this indeterminate capacity of agents to act strategically, whether it is the government, competition, suppliers or customers, is what defines constitutes uncertainty and creates risk. And it is by definition the task of the academic field of management to find ways how to minimize the negative effects of strategic behaviour of the participants in the organizational environment and find strategies how to maximize the effects of actions done by the organization itself. But this task has proven to be rather tough and, what is more important, appears to be open-ended.

3. Power vs. Values: Instructive Case of Public Administration

The field of public administration in many respects is different from that of other social sciences in the sense that it had to grapple with the structure/agency problem much earlier than many of other fields in social science. Public administration as an academic field cannot be considered apart from the state and the formation of administrative science originated in the absolute monarchies in Europe in the 17th century. However, the study was limited to cases and examples with the core concern of managing king's income and domain (Raadschelders 2008). The European tradition of public administration has remained concerned with the issues far removed from politics. For M. Weber the rise of the bureaucratic state is inseparable from the development of capitalism. The capitalist system rests upon rational calculation and therefore predictable system of administration and justice is the key to its proper functioning (Ringer 2004).

However, the organic development of the European public administration can be contrasted with the "scientifically"-based and wilful attempts to reform the American state. Prior to the writings of W. Wilson in the late 19th century, the idea of bureaucracy had a low standing in the American public discourse. American government was organized around the spoils system. The spoils (Cook 2007) system is a feature of radical nature America republicanism (Stillman 1990). The republican idea contended that government can only be elected; therefore, the winner of election would appoint people on the basis of trust rather than professional merit. However, Wilson's (1887) essay inspired by the economic advances in Europe and the ideas of Taylors' scientific management argued that the study of administration had important place in the workings of government. For him administration which is run not through democratic bargaining but through efficient management is an all important feature of the state. Democratic process alone is not sufficient for a democratic system. Good decisions are worth nothing if they are not implemented properly. Thus, in a paradoxical twist less democracy through more bureaucracy for Wilson actually amounts to more democracy through increased efficiency (Cook 2007). Wilson's ideas follow the broader contemporary belief that the development of society is teleological, i.e. is moving towards some final goal or form. This perspective

known as historicism for Wilson meant that if the US were to succeed as a state, it had to go in step with time (Pestritto 2005). This resulted in the construction of the American administrative state as a political project rather than an incremental outcome interaction among social forces.

But by the middle of the 20th century it was obvious that not everything in the development of the administrative state which was managed according to the latest achievements of “scientific” management study went according to the expectation. The search for the reasons has resulted in fundamental methodological debate that has been raging in the American Public administration academe for more than fifty years and which by no means has ended. In 1946 D. Waldo published his work on the development of the American administrative state in which he contended that the real reason for its occurrence were not the structural conditions (such as urbanization, territorial consolidation, the need to service capitalism and the obvious success of the hierarchical model in business). It was the political ideology that drove the development of bureaucracy in particular ways (he points the finger of blame primarily on the progresivist movement of which W. Wilson is the most prominent). The main features of the ideology behind the administrative state are the “evangelic of efficiency” and the moral mission of America to export democracy, which was only possible by demonstrating its merit of superior efficiency (Waldo 2007 [1948]). For Waldo subverting the democratic process with ideology such as described above was unacceptable because he saw democracy not as means of progress (which would make it redundant in case it became a hindrance) but as ends.

In the same year Simon (1946) published his paper criticizing public administration theory for being not rigorous enough in its scientific inquiry and therefore producing conflicting results which do not allow for an improvement of administrative performance. This inevitably led to a fundamental rift in the theory of public administration which manifested itself in the open polemic between Waldo and Simon and forced many of the scholars to start taking sides with either one of them since the early 50s’ (Raadschelders 2008).

The core issue of this debate will resonate with a reader informed in a broader social theory problematic. For Simon the separation of values and facts

was a possible and important exercise in both study and practice of public administration (Simon 1997 [1947]) while for Waldo the two were inseparable (Miller 2007). The reason for the difference is that efficiency for Simon was a value-neutral index of organizational performance while Waldo saw efficiency as a political value in itself and contended that by making a case for the value-neutrality of efficiency one removes it away from the field of political debate and thus reduces the amount of democracy and creates the conditions for the increase of unaccountable bureaucratic power (Harmon 1989).

Arguably in human society the question of power can never be overlooked. And in some recent literature the conceptualization of power is considered to be the key to the resolution of the conflict between the positivist and competing arguments. One such attempt is that of Flyvbjerg (2001). Flyvbjerg contends that the problem with social science is that it is conceptualized in a similar way as natural science and that this approach is fundamentally flawed. Or as Miller & Fox (2006) put it: “rational-comprehensive social science is a mistake the Enlightenment”. To assume that such a thing is possible means an assumption that a society is inhabited by predictable, rational and maximizing individuals. For Flyvbjerg attempts to mimic natural science in social research are misled because modern understanding of a science overlooks certain modes of knowledge which were fundamental in ancient philosophy. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle outlines three intellectual virtues: *techne*, *phronesis* and *episteme* (Eikeland 2007). *Techne* is concerned with skill and calculation and has given rise to technology, *episteme* on the other hand has given rise to the theory of knowledge and abstract science that discovers natural laws and produces explanatory and predictive theory. Social sciences attempts to discover natural laws for society have all but failed. One explanation may be that there are fundamental irrationalities behind the rationalization of society itself. For Weber rational behaviour in secular capitalism was only possible given the irrational belief of predestination which allowed for a rule abiding activity in economy in the single aim of profit maximization (Kim 2004). But in a secular setting an argument for rationality and objectivity can only exist provided that there is a possibility to separate mind and emotion inside a human (Martin 2007). Discredited as it maybe, this belief is so strong that for Hood (2007) it amounts to a form of religion. And if we ac-

cept that impersonality is impossible in any social setting we can claim that a belief in rationality and objectivity than we must accept that this belief must serve a certain function in order to explain its persistence. From this perspective a claim can be made that claims of science to rationality and objectivity allow for the legitimation of its institutional power. However, such power depends on the credibility of the outputs that science produces. Therefore, it may be no coincidence that the field of public administration has produced the first attempts to differentiate between social and natural sciences by investigating alternatives to the *episteme*. Notably, this idea was put forward by Morgan (1988) as a consequence of the methodological crisis brought about by Waldo/Simon debate.

4. Paradigms: Good for Institutions Bad for Cooperation?

It has become a convention to suggest that cooperation is the mechanism that produces greatest social good when considering relations between Business and the Academe. At first glance this seems perfectly feasible as Business and the Academe perform different social functions which are complimentary: Universities have a task to develop technology and train personnel and businesses have a task to put these technologies and personnel to good use driving profitability. However, the separation is not as clear cut as one would want. Universities themselves have stakeholders who have agendas either for profitability (in case of private institutions) or accountability (in case of public institutions) while businesses can go about training personnel and developing technology in-house. Therefore, it is not given that an academic and business organization would cooperate when put together and (if they do) produce added value.

From the point of view of social sciences, the value that can be provided to a business is problematic in a sense that the product is seldom tangible. And the case is completely opposite when natural and technological sciences come together with a business. Consider this: a new design of a washing machine either works or it does not and either way it can be quantified and business plans can be adjusted accordingly. Whereas when a business consultant comes knocking, doing as he says is impossible to compare against a range of alternative strategies because they simply never happened. If the performance of a business im-

proves greatly or it collapses to make a judgment on the worth of the consultant, advice is rather simple yet in most cases the results ends up being in the “grey zone”. So, businesses are not necessarily ready to try out the discoveries of social sciences on their own skin.

On the academic side of the interaction, the issue is still more complex. The Academe as a whole has never been established to serve the interests of capitalism and very often it is a potent source of criticism towards capitalism. Much of social science aims at changing the way government works rather than the way business works. And much of the research finds that this improvement can come at the expense of businesses. This internal institutional disconnect within social science works on several levels: first, it is the legitimation of research conducted in a “scientific” way and, second, it is the disciplinary and “paradigm” differentiations that decentralize social science to a point where one can get irreconcilable conclusions on the management of any given problem.

It is a fact that academic institutions are the place for the socialization of the elites of any political system. Science as the institution for the production of rational knowledge serves a pivotal ideological function. In the modern rationality the main myth underpins social cohesion. Through this, it is possible to explain organizational isomorphism towards the Weberian “iron cage” where the legal-rational model of bureaucratic governance becomes crucial in maintaining this myth that society is governed through rational and calculated decisions that produce the best possible outcomes (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). However, recent decades have seen the rise of criticism towards the bureaucratic model and sustained attempts to find new organizational solutions to the challenges of modern capitalism (Child 2005). However, the ability of business and political leaders alike to claim rationality in their decisions remains the necessary minimum that legitimizes their right to a leadership position.

This puts disciplines of social science in a seemingly impossible situation: the idea of rationality demands that there should be a set of laws which determine the behaviour of society, knowledge of which would allow the conduct of leaders to produce the best possible outcomes. The only reason why an academic institution can hope to get financing is by sustaining this position. On the other hand, attempts to find

these “laws” over the past century have failed miserably and many thinkers from within the institutional ranks become dissident with such a view. Yet embracing the position of these dissidents at the organizational level would be suicidal to an institution because it could not possibly claim to generate superior knowledge to any other form of knowledge, such as shamanism (see e.g. Stewart 2009).

However, obvious persistence of academic institutions is a testament to the fact that there was a way found around this problem. And the solution came in the form of a notion of paradigm. Physicist-turned-historian T. Kuhn is credited with proposing the idea that scientific knowledge comes about not through cumulative process but through revolutionary discovery that contradicts all or most previous scientific beliefs. Kuhn has demonstrated this by analyzing the genesis of the field of physics (1996 [1962]). But natural science has always been a source of inspiration for the social and it was only a matter of time until the idea of paradigms became an inseparable part of the social sciences. But the social science idea of paradigm came with a twist. If for Kuhn science can only be considered as such only when a given field operates within a single paradigm, in social sciences this stops being the case (Guba and Lincoln 2004). In social sciences we can discern a variety of paradigms. And what is even odder is that paradigms do not really need to be institutionalized but are often the researcher’s result of creative work through which he positions his beliefs relative to other researchers or groups of researchers whom he generalizes into paradigms. These can be generalized to the entire social sciences (e.g. Ritzer 2008, Guba and Lincoln, 2004, Blaikie 2010) or limited to a particular discipline (e.g. Sil and Katzenstein 2010, Hay 2002).

A case may be made that the attractiveness of paradigm discourse in the social science is so great because to an extent it solves the contradiction between rationality and the impossibility to prove that rationality is ultimately possible. Paradigm allows a scientist to assume a set of “axioms” and not worry about trying to prove their factuality. They are simply presented as part of the paradigm he operates in. This allows producing logically and empirically consistent research and knowledge and avoiding irrefutable criticism from peer who may be representatives of some other paradigm. Both for the researcher who gets his payroll from the academic institution and for

the institution itself it is a positive outcome. For the former it saves a great deal of time and effort for designing and theorizing research which ultimately has little added value to himself; for the latter it allows to uphold the reputation of a place that produces objective knowledge.

But this situation has a dark side as it demonstrates the typical features of the dilemma of the “tragedy of the commons” (coined by Hardin 1968). Tragedy of the commons is a situation when there is useful recourse that is not owned by anyone. All the users of such recourse will not be motivated to use it sustainably because individual restraint will only put one in a position where the person who shows less wins more. Ultimately, this leads to the depletion of the recourse. A claim of science as a whole to the production of objective knowledge can be considered such a recourse. When contradicting paradigms claim to be the ones that produce the best type of knowledge, it is impossible (of course it may equally be impossible to do that for an insider) for an outsider to evaluate which of the claims has greater merit. And this for a rational businessman means that investment into such research is not a good idea. Thus, the competition among paradigms serves not to distribute the funds that would be available to social research but rather to deplete by discouraging investment.

5. Alternative: Phronesis as Grounds for Cooperation

Following Weber, Flyvbjerg (2001) differentiates between the value rationality and instrumental rationality. He contends that this is a very important differentiation. Modernity has continued along the path of favouring instrumental rationality because the rationality of *homo economicus* is considered as a given (Miller and Fox, 2006). On the other hand, according to Weber this results in the production of the iron cage where the calculation of means supersedes the understanding what ends social ends should any action be achieving (Kim 2004). Social science is accomplice to it if it operates along the lines of positivism. In other words, science in the natural science sense of the word cannot possibly hope to provide meaning and therefore cannot be considered sufficient for social action (Lindenfeld 1980).

Maintaining the argument that social science can produce deterministic knowledge about the causality of social events is a position that the social sci-

entist can never hope to defend in a discussion with a natural scientist. As Feynman once put it: “social science is an example of pseudoscience, they follow forms but they don’t get any laws” (Feynman, 2000 [1981]). However, for Flyvbjerg (2001) this is only the case when a social scientist is trying to beat the natural scientist at his own game. Social inquiry has its strengths in a completely different form of knowledge. Aristotle Flyvbjerg contends that the Enlightenment philosophy overlooked a fundamental form of knowledge that of *Phronesis* which was an integral part of prior understanding.

Flyvbjerg (2001) begins with the notion that humans are self reflecting which is not available to non-living objects or non-conscious animal. That is the reason for the problem of prediction as Karl Popper observed: “human behavior depends upon new knowledge” (Checkland 2007). And no human is in any position to know what future knowledge would be because as the logic tells us he would know it in the present. This self-reflection means that a useful product to businesses and societies can only be produced through value sensitivity and open system of *praxis* (realized through social commentary and social action). This means that social scientist ought to operate through the accumulation of experience which makes him better positioned to offer a superior strategy to the consumer of his knowledge. For that the understanding of ever changing power relations in the society is paramount. And this is where the added value of a scientist and a social scientific institution might lie: the ability to continuously observe and update their knowledge and learn from prior research giving understanding of society that is unattainable or too expensive for anyone business institution.

Flyvbjerg (2001) propose to approach to the *Phronetic* research by asking four value-rational questions:

- (i) Where are we going?
- (ii) Who gains, who loses, and by which mechanisms?
- (iii) Is it desirable?
- (iv) What should be done?

These are the questions that ultimately interest the stakeholders outside the institution of science and these are the questions that can realistically be hoped to be answered by social inquiry.

6. Institutional Persistence: Obstacle for Phronetic Social Science

One important lesson that Putnam draws from his 1993 study is that social institutions are incredibly persistent and even centuries of government imposed social practice are not guaranteed to uproot the millennia-long civic practices.

A strand of Organizational Theory that is known as institutionalism over the past decades has tried to develop a theory explaining why certain institutions are impossible to change. Scott (2008) summarizes that institutionalization happens at three levels: (i) regulative, (ii) normative and (iii) cultural-cognitive. Although institutions can be understood as sets of rules to which individuals feel the need to abide, they are inseparable from organizational arrangements. These can be incredibly varied. For instance, monogamous family as a network of micro-organizations is astoundingly persistent despite the fact that over the period of secularization of the state practice of life in the family has had no formal coordination.

From this point of view, Universities, Colleges, Capitalism, and Corporations are all institutions. To some extent they all have originally been established in act of state-regulative or church-regulative (in case of Universities) institutions. However, later they developed specific organizational forms. Over time society socialized to accept that these organizational forms are the proper way to go about business and become limited in their imagination. Functionaries of any such organizations have an interest in the perpetuation of these practices. This results in the institutionalization of practice towards a deeper (normative) level. Ultimately, some practices through tradition become so deep seated they are bound to individual identity. They become the cultural-cognitive factors of society and attempts to alter them cause physiological and neurological reactions (Newton 2007).

Therefore, we can conclude that policy failures can often be attributed to regulative attempts to alter social practices at the normative or cultural-cognitive level. Trying to reform social science along the looser lines of *phronesis* can be a very dangerous task. In the fields of economics and political science there are movements aimed at such reforms known as post-autistic economic and perestroika respectively. In the case of political science, the name may be instructive. The Soviet Union was built by force and force was

the legitimizing principle which allowed it to exist. The very moment the Soviet leadership attempted to remove this practice, the entire system lost any legitimacy with society and resulted in a collapse. And it is not unwarranted to question whether the Academe, as we know it today, can successfully reform from within because a *Phronetic* challenges the very argument which was used to establish many of the social science disciplines.

7. Conclusions

What is said above leads us to conclude that cooperation between Business and Science (especially social science) raises a set of fundamental challenges to the Academe which it at present setup may not be able to accommodate. Examples of Science-Business cooperation success are generally found in the technology sector which does not suffer from the Simonian “schizophrenia”. Attempts to heal social science have led nowhere so far. And there is an increasing chorus of voices, which call for the reformation of social science instead of trying to find laws of social reality which may well not exist. And even if they did, it is hard to imagine that the scientist being only another human may attain them. However, few reforms yield results that reformers initially hope to achieve. And in the case of social sciences, the dangers are obvious. So, to conclude a metaphor from geography may be appropriate. Hay and Lister (2006) propose to view the society as an “institutional landscape”. In this landscape some institutions are stable and powerful, others are more dynamic constantly interacting with other institutions giving rise to new institutions and destroying the less well adapted. Any business in this environment has a lot of “blind spots” in this landscape because opponents may be hiding behind seemingly harmless institutions. And the added-value, which the social researcher may bring to a business, is providing it with a map of institutions. This map may never be as accurate as reality, but no map is. It is this cartographic work which needs to constantly be updated that is the basis for social scientific knowledge and reflection (Hood 2007). With this understanding we must also be ready to accept that the organizational settings we are familiar with may be the impediment to this work rather than help. So in the spirit of *Phronesis* we must constantly be on the lookout for cases of success which will come from where all cases of success come from: entrepreneurial trial and error.

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