A Brief Report of the

The First Lecture under Regional Centre Puducherry Distinguished Lecture Series

By

Dr. Sebastian Normandin
Ashoka University
Sonepet, Haryana

On

“Some Thoughts on the History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences”

Discussant

Dr. K. Gulam Dasthagir
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, Pondicherry University

Chair

Dr. R.R. Dhanapall
Chairman
Indian Institute of Public Administration, Puducherry Branch

09 Saturday, January 2016, Puducherry
The Regional Centre Puducherry, Institute of Social Sciences organised the first lecture under the Regional Centre Puducherry Distinguished Lecture Series by Dr. Sebastian Normandin of Ashoka University, Sonepet, Haryana on “Some Thoughts on the History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences”, at 11 AM on 09 Saturday, January 2016 at the Conference Hall, 02nd Floor, No.14/2, PWD Planning Building, Lal Bahadur Sastri Street, Puducherry-605 001.

Mr. V. Selvam, the Founder-Regional Director delivered the welcome address and introduced the speaker to the audience. Dr. R.R. Dhanapall, Chairman of the Indian Institute of Public Administration, Puducherry Branch presided over the event and effectively conducted the proceedings; Dr. K. Gulam Dastagir, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Pondicherry University was the discussant and critically analysed Dr. Sebastian’s lecture; Many social scientists, academicians, teachers, research scholars and more than 70 under & post-graduates students from different backgrounds from the university, colleges, and research institutions in Puducherry attended the lecture and actively participated in the discussion and interacted with the distinguished speaker Dr. Sebastian Normandin.

While welcoming the participants and introducing the distinguished speaker Dr. Sebastian Normandin to the audience, Mr. V. Selvam, the Founder-Regional Director of the Regional Centre Puducherry, ISS briefly outlined the history of Institute of Social Sciences, New
Delhi; the importance of establishing a Regional Centre of Institute of Social Sciences in Puducherry considering the unmet demand for an institution of excellence for social science research, advocacy, and outreach programmes in the Union Territory of Puducherry; He emphasised specifically the mission of the Regional Centre Puducherry to carry out research both in theoretical and empirical realms on a wide range of issues concerning social sciences from an interdisciplinary perspective without compromising the scientific temper and to create informed public opinion, recommend policy and contribute to the discourse on participatory democracy, local governance, and the development of Puducherry. Further, he explained the significance of creating a platform like ‘Distinguished Lecture Series’ as an essential part of the Regional Centre Puducherry’s activities in order to promote scholarship by way of encouraging visiting & invited scholars and eminent personalities to share their study results, experiences and to critically engage in discussions and debates truly in the spirit of enlightenment and action.

Dr. Sebastian in his lecture made a brilliant attempt to address the questions-Whether social sciences can truly be scientific without conducting experiments as in natural sciences? Why social sciences cling to a fairly outdated paradigm of what science is and what scientists do? And why there is not more skepticism about the epistemological assumptions of mainstream social sciences? According to him, much of this involves the dilemma of how to produce useful and broadly applicable knowledge. At the level of institutionalization and policy and action it seems necessary to make supposedly objective claims backed by solid empirical evidence (i.e. statistics and quantitative data). Yet much of this knowledge, when evaluated critically, can be seen to have emerged from deeply subjective, historically contingent and ultimately “unscientific” contexts. And, yet, on the other side of the spectrum, while many ethnographic and historical analyses are quite penetrating and persuasive, they often fail to make any broader claims about possible policy implementation or provide any clear roadmaps towards social change. Drawing heavily on the critique of positivism and logical positivism and the historical evidences on the critique of social sciences particularly from the works of earlier Enlightenment thinkers like Giambattista Vico and Dilthey who argued in deep and complex hermeneutic terms, “that it is only through the lived, vital expression of human experience that understanding is gained, and that a neutral, objective point of view was largely a fiction. Man cannot understand himself through reflection or introspection, but only through what history can tell him…and
never in objective concepts but always only in the living experience which springs up out of the depths of his own being..., ...that man’s understanding is dependent on past worldviews, interpretations, and a shared world...,” adding further that “this understanding is also dependent on a present world-view as well,” Sebastian argued that much of social science work remains patently “positivist” in its modern sense - committed to quantitative research which makes nominally objective claims about social reality. And yet, in the history and philosophy of science, even the claims about the problematic nature of objectivity in the natural sciences are now a commonplace. According to him, “this is an impasse and he finds no real solution to get beyond this and he believes that the complexities of this ultimately dualistic ‘schism’ in the nature of the human science is not only unavoidable, but has clear historical and philosophical roots.”

In response to Dr. Sebastian’s deliberations, Dr. K. Gulam Dasthagir, by tracing the evolution of social sciences from Comte to post-modernism, emphasized the primacy of understanding the historical, theoretical, institutional context and philosophical foundations with a view to provide theoretically informed guidance to practicing research methods for investigating society and culture. He highlighted that the philosophical foundations of social research originated at a time when social thinkers were primarily committed to an idea of a social science modeled on the approach of natural sciences. He further elaborated that consequent to the struggles with the old quantitative orthodoxy and the revolutions in social theory and methodology that have successfully challenged the once dominant, quantitatively oriented social survey approach, a variety of theoretically informed qualitative approaches to social research have been crafted. Concomitantly, Dr. Dasthagir advocated the way in which students and research scholars learn ‘methods’ requires a continual awareness of the fact that research is part of a dynamic, reflexive engagement with social and cultural worlds therefore social researchers should not just apply a set of neutral techniques to the issues which they investigate. While Many existing textbooks and curricula imply a ‘toolbox’ approach to research, he prescribed that a considerable effort can now be made to present different methodological traditions demonstrating linkage between the philosophy of social science, social theory and the actual practice of social research in teaching and learning research methodology enabling the practicing researchers to make informed choices with knowledge about what is of value in each approach.
While Dr. Sebastian, in response to students’ questions, explained the linkage between occidental and oriental philosophical foundations, Dr. Dastagir highlighted the relevance of knowledge in social sciences even to Civil Service aspirants and administrators and Dr. K. Ramesh, faculty at the Regional Centre Puducherry, proposed vote of thanks profoundly thanking the distinguished speaker and the participants for making the event a constructive and memorable one.

V. Selvam  
Regional Director  
Regional Centre Puducherry ISS

A Few Photos of the Event
Mr. V. Selvam, Founder-Regional Director, Regional Centre Puducherry, Institute of Social Sciences, is honouring the distinguished speaker Dr. Sebastian Normandin, Ashoka University, Haryana.
Mr. V. Selvam, Founder-Regional Director, Regional Centre Puducherry, Institute of Social Sciences, is honouring Dr. K. Gulam Dastghir, Associate Professor, Dept of Sociology, Pondicherry University.

Mr. V. Selvam, Founder-Regional Director, Regional Centre Puducherry, Institute of Social Sciences, is honouring Dr. R.R. Dhanapall, Chairman, Indian Institute of Public Administration-Puducherry Branch.
(R-L): Mr. V. Selvam, Founder-Regional Director, Regional Centre Puducherry, Institute of Social Sciences delivering the welcome address and introducing the distinguished speaker Dr. Sebastian Normandin. Dr. R.R. Dhanapall, Chairman, Indian Institute of Public Administration-Puducherry Branch who presided over the event and Dr. K. Gulam Dasthagir, Associate Professor, Dept of Sociology, Pondicherry University, the discussant of the lecture look on.

Dr. R.R. Dhanapall, Chairman, Indian Institute of Public Administration-Puducherry Chapter, delivering the Chair’s address.
Dr. Sebastian Normandin, Ashoka University delivering the First Lecture of the Regional Centre Puducherry's Distinguished Lecture Series.

Dr. Sebastian Normandin’s lecture is in progress.
Dr. K. Gulam Dastagir, Associate Professor, Dept of Sociology, Pondicherry University and discussant of the lecture is discussing Dr. Sebastian’s talk.
Interaction with the speaker during the discussion hour.

Interaction with the speaker during the discussion hour.
Dr. Sebastian is responding to participants’ questions and comments.

Ms. Sreelekha, K.R., Faculty, Regional Centre Puducherry, ISS is compering the event.
Dr. K. Ramesh, Faculty, Regional Centre Puducherry, ISS, is proposing Vote of Thanks.
Group photo (L-R): Mr. Vengadachalam, Faculty, Regional Centre Puducherry ISS; Dr. Sebastian Normandin, Ashok University, Haryana; Mr. V. Selvam, Founder-Regional Director, Regional Centre Puducherry, ISS; Dr. R.R. Dhanapall, Chairman, Indian Institute of Public Administration-Puducherry Branch; Dr. K. Gulam Dastaghir, Dept of Sociology, Pondicherry University; Dr. K. Ramesh, Faculty, Regional Centre Puducherry ISS; and Ms. K.R. Sreelekha, Faculty, Regional Centre Puducherry, ISS.

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