**Between Meaning and Method: The Humanities–Social Sciences Nexus in Understanding Society**

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**Abstract**

The longstanding divide between the humanities and the social sciences is increasingly untenable in a world grappling with complex crises—social inequality, cultural fragmentation, and epistemic uncertainty. This paper explores the fertile intersection between *meaning* and *method*, proposing that a deeper understanding of society emerges when the interpretive richness of the humanities converges with the analytical frameworks of the social sciences. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, theoretical reflection, and applied case studies, the paper examines how narrative, memory, and cultural expression, when paired with sociological inquiry and empirical reasoning, offer a more holistic approach to human experience. Examples in trauma studies and migration research demonstrate that interpretive and empirical paradigms are not mutually exclusive but mutually illuminating. The paper argues that epistemological pluralism and methodological complementarity are essential to producing decolonial, ethical, and inclusive knowledge. Ultimately, it makes the case for interdisciplinary collaboration as a critical mode of inquiry in pursuing social understanding and transformation.

**Keywords**: Cultural Interpretation; epistemological pluralism; humanities and social sciences; holistic social inquiry; Interdisciplinarity;Narrative and Method

**Introduction**

In contemporary academic discourse, the divide between the humanities and the social sciences has long been both a site of productive tension and intellectual misapprehension. While the humanities are often associated with pursuing meaning, subjectivity, and qualitative depth, the social sciences are traditionally aligned with empirical rigor, methodological exactitude, and explanatory frameworks. However, this dichotomy is increasingly being interrogated as both fields grapple with the complexities of understanding society in all its historical, cultural, political, and economic dimensions (Benton & Craib, 2011; Kagan, 2009).

The humanities, through disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, and the arts, provide interpretive tools to explore how individuals and communities construct and convey meaning. These fields are fundamentally concerned with human values, symbolic systems, ethical considerations, and the phenomenological textures of lived experience (Nussbaum, 2010). They foreground the subjective, the particular, and the narrative, often resisting reductive explanations in favour of ambiguity, nuance, and multiplicity. In contrast, the social sciences—encompassing sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics—are more closely identified with systematic inquiry, hypothesis testing, and generalisable insights about human behaviour and social organisation (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Giddens, 1984). They aim to identify causal mechanisms, structural patterns, and institutional dynamics using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

However, framing these two domains as mutually exclusive overlooks their historical entanglements and epistemological interdependence. The supposed boundary between meaning and method is not a chasm but a permeable frontier. For example, interpretive sociology (Weber, 1949), cultural studies (Hall, 1997), and postcolonial theory (Said, 1978) have long exemplified how insights from the humanities can enrich social scientific inquiry. Likewise, scholars in the humanities increasingly engage with empirical data and sociological paradigms to ground their critiques and narratives in broader structural realities (Bhambra, 2014; Appadurai, 1996).

In a world characterised by global crises, identity politics, technological disruptions, and environmental uncertainties, the need for integrative approaches that traverse disciplinary boundaries has never been more urgent. Understanding society demands more than methodological precision or interpretive sophistication in isolation—it requires a dialogue between them. This paper situates itself at the intersection of that dialogue, exploring the humanities–social sciences nexus as a dynamic space where meaning and method converge to illuminate the human condition in all its complexity.

The paper critically examines the philosophical foundations, historical trajectories, and contemporary practices that define this interdisciplinary relationship and argues for a more holistic epistemology. By analysing key case studies—such as gender studies, postcolonial critiques, and environmental humanities—it demonstrates how the synthesis of meaning and method enables richer, more contextually grounded insights into social life. Ultimately, the paper contends that bridging the humanities and social sciences is not merely an academic imperative but a necessary condition for responding to society's multifaceted challenges.

**2. Conceptual Foundations**

Understanding the intersection of the humanities and social sciences requires a clear engagement with their conceptual underpinnings—particularly how each tradition conceives of knowledge, human agency, and the process of inquiry. At the heart of this distinction lies a tension between meaning and method: the humanities privilege the interpretive and symbolic dimensions of human experience, whereas the social sciences foreground systematic methods of observation, analysis, and explanation. However, these distinctions are neither absolute nor impermeable; rather, they reflect different epistemological orientations often complementary when critically examined.

**2.1 The Humanities: Meaning, Interpretation, and Human Experience**

The humanities are primarily concerned with how individuals and cultures create, express, and contest meaning. Rooted in traditions of hermeneutics, phenomenology, and critical theory, the humanities pursue questions of value, ethics, aesthetics, and identity (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981). Central to this orientation is the belief that human experience cannot be fully understood through empirical data alone but must be interpreted within its cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts.

Disciplines such as literature, philosophy, history, and the arts function as interpretive frameworks that seek to uncover the symbolic and narrative structures through which societies make sense of themselves. Reading a text, viewing a painting, or interpreting a historical event becomes a mode of engaging with the human condition—marked by ambiguity, contradiction, and layered meanings (Taylor, 1985). As Nussbaum (2010) argues, the humanities cultivate the moral imagination and empathetic understanding essential for democratic citizenship and ethical engagement in a pluralistic world.

Moreover, the humanities often resist universalist claims favouring particularism and contextualism, recognising that meaning is always embedded in social, linguistic, and ideological structures. This emphasis on the local, the historical, and the subjective challenges the assumptions of neutrality and objectivity often associated with the scientific method (Spivak, 1988; Clifford, 1986).

**2.2 The Social Sciences: Method, Empiricism, and Theorising Society**

The social sciences, in contrast, developed under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism and positivism, aspiring to generate systematic knowledge about human behaviour and social organisation through empirical observation and methodological rigour (Comte, 1853; Durkheim, 1982). Like nature, their foundational premise is that society can be studied through structured inquiry—formulating hypotheses, collecting data, and testing theories.

This orientation has produced powerful insights into social structures, institutions, inequality patterns, and change processes. For instance, sociological theories of class (Marx, 1976), bureaucracy (Weber, 1949), and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) have offered compelling frameworks to understand the dynamics of power, economy, and identity in modern societies. Methodologically, the social sciences rely on quantitative and qualitative tools—from statistical models to ethnographic observation—each aiming to enhance research reliability, validity, and replicability (Silverman, 2016).

Nevertheless, within the social sciences themselves, there exists a growing recognition of the limitations of pure positivism and the necessity of interpretive approaches. The rise of interpretive sociology (Weber, 1949), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), and critical ethnography (Madison, 2011) signals a shift toward embracing the hermeneutic dimension of social life—where meaning, symbolism, and agency become central analytic categories.

As Flyvbjerg (2001) persuasively argues, the most pressing questions in the social sciences are often "phronetic"—ethical and context-dependent—rather than purely technical. Therefore, the capacity to understand society lies in measuring variables and engaging deeply with the values, discourses, and power relations that shape human action.

**2.3 Converging Trajectories: Meaning and Method as Complementary Epistemes**

Despite their differing emphases, the humanities and social sciences are committed to understanding the human world in its complexity. Both traditions acknowledge that knowledge is socially constructed, historically situated, and politically mediated. The humanities emphasise depth, reflexivity, and interpretation; the social sciences emphasise structure, comparison, and generalisation. When brought into conversation, these approaches enrich one another.

For example, in the field of gender studies, literary criticism and sociological theory intersect to illuminate how gender identities are both discursively constructed and socially regulated (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002). Similarly, postcolonial studies draw upon historical inquiry, anthropological fieldwork, and literary theory to challenge Eurocentric narratives and recover subaltern voices (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). These examples demonstrate that meaning and method are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing dimensions of knowledge production.

In sum, this section underscores that the humanities and social sciences are not simply divided by epistemological preferences but are connected through a shared concern with interpreting and explaining human life. Rather than seeing them in opposition, it is more fruitful to see them as engaging in a dialectical relationship—where the method is enriched by meaning and meaning gains clarity through the method.

**3. Historical Trajectories and Disciplinary Boundaries**

The institutional and epistemological distinction between the humanities and social sciences is not a natural or fixed condition but a historical construct that has evolved in tandem with broader socio-political, intellectual, and technological shifts. Understanding how these disciplines emerged, diverged, and at times converged is crucial for situating the current debate about their nexus in producing social knowledge. This section traces the genealogies of the humanities and social sciences, interrogates the boundaries erected between them, and reflects on the shifting intellectual landscapes that have enabled dialogue, friction, and synthesis.

**3.1 The Enlightenment and the Rise of Disciplinarity**

The roots of modern disciplinary formations can be traced back to the European Enlightenment (late 17th–18th centuries), when rationalism, empiricism, and the ideal of universal knowledge gained ascendancy. During this period, knowledge was increasingly classified, categorised, and institutionalised within specific domains—giving rise to the early contours of the modern university (Foucault, 1970; Porter, 1995). Enlightenment thinkers like Kant, Diderot, and Comte contributed to this project by delineating the boundaries between moral philosophy, natural science, and political economy (Outram, 2013).

Auguste Comte’s positivism laid the foundation for the social sciences by proposing that society could and should be studied using methods akin to the natural sciences (Comte, 1853). This marked a pivotal moment: the idea that social life could be explained through empirical observation and classification introduced a new epistemic ethos grounded in methodological regularity, causality, and prediction. Meanwhile, the humanities, particularly history and philology, retained their commitment to interpretive, diachronic, and normative inquiries (Shumway, 2004).

The late 19th century witnessed the institutionalisation of both domains in European and American universities. Faculties of arts and letters were separated from the emerging social science departments, each with distinct curricular goals, funding mechanisms, and scholarly standards. This disciplinary segmentation, while promoting internal rigour, also led to the compartmentalisation of knowledge, often reinforcing artificial boundaries between meaning and method (Readings, 1996).

**3.2 Divergence and the Positivist-Interpretivist Divide**

By the early 20th century, the divergence between the humanities and the social sciences had crystallised into what became known as the positivist–interpretivist divide. Social sciences—particularly economics, psychology, and political science—gravitated toward quantification, objectivity, and scientific neutrality (Durkheim, 1982; Popper, 1959). In contrast, the humanities increasingly embraced critical theory, historicism, and hermeneutics as modes of contesting knowledge's neutrality and universality (Dilthey, 1989; Gadamer, 2004).

This epistemological rift was most clearly articulated in the German distinction between the Naturwissenschaften (natural sciences) and the Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences), with thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey arguing that the social world must be understood (Verstehen) rather than merely explained (Erklären) (Dilthey, 1989). In the Anglo-American context, C. P. Snow’s famous "Two Cultures" lecture (1959) lamented the growing chasm between scientific and literary intellectuals, framing it as a crisis of communication and epistemological hostility.

Moreover, the 20th-century growth of professionalised academic disciplines, peer-reviewed journals, and research funding further entrenched disciplinary identities. Humanities scholars were often excluded from research councils that prioritised “measurable” outcomes, while social scientists found themselves tethered to policy-oriented research agendas that sometimes compromised their critical autonomy (Frickel & Gross, 2005).

**3.3 Convergences: The Interdisciplinary Turn**

Despite this entrenched separation, the latter half of the 20th century saw growing convergences between the humanities and social sciences, catalysed by intellectual movements that challenged disciplinary orthodoxies. Cultural studies, critical theory, poststructuralism, and feminist epistemologies emerged as hybrid spaces where interpretive and empirical methods were combined to analyse power, identity, and representation (Hall, 1992; Haraway, 1988; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

For instance, the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies under Stuart Hall foregrounded popular culture and media as serious objects of analysis, drawing on both Marxist theory and ethnographic methods (Hall, 1992). Michel Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy of knowledge (Foucault, 1972, 1980) reconfigured historical inquiry by blending philosophical critique with archival investigation—blurring the line between the historian and the sociologist.

Simultaneously, fields like anthropology became inherently interdisciplinary as they straddled narrative interpretation and fieldwork methodology. Influential works such as Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) advocated for “thick description”—an approach that recognised culture as a text to be read, decoded, and contextualised.

In the 21st century, area studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and digital humanities have continued to trouble disciplinary boundaries, reinforcing the need for transdisciplinary dialogue. These fields challenge the assumption that method and meaning must operate in isolation, demonstrating how interpretive frameworks and empirical analysis can be mutually generative.

**3.4 Institutional and Pedagogical Challenges**

Despite these convergences, significant institutional and pedagogical barriers persist. University structures, funding models, and performance metrics continue to privilege disciplines that align with market-driven outcomes and scientific legitimacy (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Humanities departments often face existential threats in the form of budget cuts, while interdisciplinary programmes are frequently marginalised within broader academic hierarchies.

Nevertheless, interdisciplinary teaching and research centres have emerged as critical spaces for experimentation and innovation. Institutions such as the University of California’s Humanities Research Institute and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton offer templates for fostering sustained engagement across epistemic boundaries. These initiatives underscore the importance of reimagining what we study and how we conceptualise knowledge itself (Klein, 1990; Nowotny et al., 2001).

**4. The Nexus in Practice: Case Studies**

While the humanities–institutional structures and epistemological assumptions have often reinforced the social sciences divide, real-world intellectual practice frequently defies these boundaries. Contemporary scholarship increasingly draws upon a hybridised epistemology, where meaning and method are not seen as oppositional but as co-constitutive elements in understanding complex social realities. This section explores how the humanities–social sciences nexus operates in practice through interdisciplinary case studies, illustrating the powerful synergies that emerge when interpretive and empirical frameworks are brought into dynamic interaction.

**4.1 Gender Studies: Interweaving Discourse and Structure**

Gender studies exemplifies the confluence of humanities-based interpretation and social science methodologies. Originating in feminist literary criticism and political theory, the field has evolved into a robust interdisciplinary domain incorporating cultural theory, sociology, anthropology, and psychology (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002). Central to gender studies is the recognition that gender is not merely a biological category but a discursively produced and socially regulated identity shaped by language, power, and institutions.

Judith Butler’s seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) draws from poststructuralist literary theory, particularly the writings of Foucault and Derrida, to argue that gender is performative—produced through repeated acts and norms rather than inherent traits. At the same time, sociologists such as Raewyn Connell (2002) have emphasised the structural dimensions of gender, including the institutionalisation of hegemonic masculinity and gendered patterns of labour and inequality. Here, method and meaning converge: empirical studies of gender disparities in education, labour, or politics are enriched by interpretive analyses of representation, language, and identity.

Feminist epistemologies further underscore this nexus by rejecting the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, insisting instead on “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988) that foregrounds the positionality of the researcher and the partiality of all knowledge claims. In practice, gender studies thus mobilises both quantitative data (e.g., wage gaps, educational attainment statistics) and qualitative inquiry (e.g., autoethnography, discourse analysis) to understand how gender operates across domains of culture, policy, and personal identity.

**4.2 Postcolonial Studies: Hybrid Histories, Hybrid Methods**

Postcolonial studies represent another domain where the humanities–social sciences nexus is both methodological and philosophical. Drawing from literary theory, history, anthropology, and political economy, postcolonial scholarship interrogates the legacies of imperialism, colonial domination, and the ongoing dynamics of global inequality (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Mbembe, 2001).

The field partly emerged from literary and cultural analysis, with scholars like Edward Said using textual criticism to expose how Orientalist discourse framed the East as inferior, exotic, and other (Said, 1978). However, postcolonial studies have always engaged deeply with social science concerns—especially those relating to state formation, migration, economic dependency, and identity politics. Anthropologists such as Talal Asad (1973) and Veena Das (2006) have brought ethnographic methods to bear on postcolonial subjects, illustrating how historical trauma, state violence, and cultural memory are lived and narrated in everyday life. One powerful example is Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) famous question—“Can the Subaltern Speak?”—which combines deconstructive textual analysis with Marxist historiography and a critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems. Her work exemplifies the fusion of critical theory with empirical attention to the erasure of marginalised voices. Similarly, Achille Mbembe’s (2001) concept of “necropolitics” extends Foucault’s biopolitics into a critique of postcolonial state violence, drawing from both political theory and case studies of contemporary Africa.

Postcolonial scholarship thus operates as an epistemological critique and a methodological reconfiguration, destabilising the Western canon while proposing alternative ways of knowing that are both rooted in lived experience and theoretically expansive.

**4.3 Environmental Humanities and Political Ecology: Narratives and Systems**

As the planet faces unprecedented environmental crises, the intersection between the humanities and the social sciences has found urgent expression in the emerging field of environmental humanities and its social science counterpart, political ecology. These fields address the material causes and consequences of ecological degradation and the cultural narratives, ethical frameworks, and symbolic systems through which societies understand nature and the environment (Heise, 2008; Nixon, 2011; Robbins, 2012).

Political ecology, rooted in geography and anthropology, examines how environmental change is shaped by power relations, political institutions, and economic systems. It employs empirical tools such as land-use mapping, resource governance studies, and policy analysis (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). However, these studies often fall short without attending to how people narrate their relationship with nature, experience ecological loss, and imagine sustainable futures.

This is where the environmental humanities intervene. Scholars like Rob Nixon (2011) and Ursula Heise (2008) argue that environmental degradation is also a crisis of representation—what Nixon calls the “slow violence” that defies spectacular media coverage and demands narrative strategies attuned to temporal complexity and emotional resonance. Literature, film, and indigenous oral traditions become vital archives for understanding the human dimensions of ecological crisis. One compelling example is the interdisciplinary analysis of climate change: while climate models and atmospheric data provide crucial projections, they cannot alone account for the social inertia, moral dissonance, and psychological denial that shape human responses. By integrating climate science with narrative ethics, myth, and memory, scholars in this space are forging new paths for both scholarship and activism.

**4.4 Digital Humanities and Computational Social Science: Bridging the Methodological Spectrum**

In the digital age, the divide between humanities and social sciences is further complicated—and potentially bridged—by the rise of digital humanities and computational social science. These fields exemplify the mutual appropriation of tools, theories, and methods across traditional boundaries.

Digital humanities use computational tools (e.g., text mining, data visualisation, GIS mapping) to analyse cultural artifacts, ranging from literature and archives to music and film (Berry, 2011). Conversely, computational social science applies algorithmic models, big data analytics, and network theory to understand social phenomena such as migration, misinformation, or political mobilisation (Lazer et al., 2009).

The intersection lies in projects that require both algorithmic precision and interpretive insight. For instance, digital mapping of slave trade routes or refugee migrations benefits from statistical accuracy but gains cultural significance only when interpreted through historical, ethical, and narrative lenses (Presner, Shepard, and Kawano, 2014). These new domains highlight the technical convergence of the humanities and social sciences and the shared imperative to ask humanistic questions of technological systems: Who is included or excluded in the data? What histories are visible or erased? What values are encoded in our algorithms?

**5. Epistemological Tensions and Complementarities**

While the intersection between the humanities and social sciences offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary innovation, it is also marked by profound epistemological tensions. These tensions often manifest in differing assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge, the role of the researcher, the aims of inquiry, and the criteria for truth and generalisation. Yet, beneath these friction points lies a rich terrain of complementarities that can enhance and deepen our understanding of social life. This section critically engages with these tensions—subjectivity versus objectivity, interpretation versus explanation, and depth versus generalisability—and explores how they may be reframed not as barriers but as productive divergences within a broader epistemic ecology.

**5.1 Objectivity, Subjectivity, and the Role of the Researcher**

One of the most persistent epistemological divides between the humanities and the social sciences concerns the role of the researcher and the question of objectivity. Social sciences, particularly those influenced by positivist traditions, have historically privileged objectivity, neutrality, and detachment as ideals of scientific rigour (Popper, 1959; Durkheim, 1982). Researchers are expected to minimise bias, maintain distance from their subjects, and produce findings that are replicable and generalisable.

In contrast, the humanities often embrace subjectivity as a valid and even essential dimension of scholarly inquiry. Interpretation is seen not as a distortion of truth but as a mode of understanding that is inevitably mediated by the positionality of the interpreter. Hermeneutics, as advanced by Gadamer (2004), insists that understanding is always historically and linguistically situated, shaped by the preconceptions and horizons of the interpreter. Similarly, feminist and postcolonial scholars argue that claims of neutrality often mask the implicit values and ideologies of dominant epistemologies (Haraway, 1988; Spivak, 1988).

However, this opposition is not as absolute as it appears. Many social scientists now acknowledge the impossibility of value-free inquiry and advocate for reflexivity—an awareness of how the researcher’s background, beliefs, and location influence the research process (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Conversely, scholars in the humanities increasingly utilise systematic approaches such as grounded theory, ethnography, and content analysis to support their interpretive claims (Charmaz, 2006). This evolving understanding suggests that the tension between subjectivity and objectivity is best seen not as a binary but as a spectrum, with each position offering unique insights depending on the research context.

**5.2 Explanation versus Interpretation: Competing Goals of Inquiry**

Another key distinction lies in the goals of knowledge production. Social sciences often aim to explain phenomena by identifying causal relationships, social mechanisms, or statistical correlations. The logic of explanation seeks to reduce complexity, uncover patterns, and make generalisations that can inform policy, practice, or theory (Giddens, 1984; Elster, 1989). By contrast, the humanities typically strive to interpret, focusing on the particular, the contingent, and the culturally embedded. Their goal is not generalisation but understanding—a nuanced, contextualised account of how individuals and communities make sense of their world (Taylor, 1985).

This difference has led to critiques on both sides. Social scientists have sometimes accused humanities scholars of relativism, obscurantism, or an aversion to evidence-based reasoning. Meanwhile, humanities scholars have challenged the social sciences for their reliance on reductionist models that often fail to capture the richness and ambiguity of lived experience (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Yet these critiques often obscure that explanation and interpretation are complementary modes of inquiry, not mutually exclusive.

The rise of interpretive social science—exemplified in symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and hermeneutic sociology—demonstrates how these approaches can converge. Scholars like Max Weber (1949) and Clifford Geertz (1973) have shown that understanding the "meaning" of social action is not a detour from explanation but a precondition for it. In this light, interpretation becomes a form of explanation that accounts for social actors' intentions, beliefs, and symbolic frameworks.

**5.3 Generalisability and Particularism: The Tension of Scale**

Closely tied to the explanation–the interpretation divide is the issue of generalisability versus particularism. Social sciences, particularly in their quantitative modes, strive for applicable findings across cases, contexts, and time. Statistical significance, random sampling, and theory-building aim to produce replicable and scalable knowledge (King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994).

In contrast, the humanities are often deeply invested in the singular, the unique, and the local. A literary analysis of a single novel, a close reading of a historical speech, or an ethnographic portrait of a community resists abstraction in favour of thick description (Geertz, 1973). This focus on specificity is not a limitation but a deliberate epistemic stance that values depth over breadth and complexity oversimplification.

Nonetheless, both approaches have much to learn from each other. The humanities can benefit from social science tools that facilitate comparative analysis or pattern recognition. At the same time, the humanistic emphasis on case-based reasoning, narrative, and emotional resonance can enrich the social sciences. Critical realism, as developed by Roy Bhaskar (1978), offers one possible bridge: it recognises the stratified nature of reality and the need for both empirical data and interpretive depth to understand social phenomena.

**5.4 Language, Power, and Epistemic Authority**

Another epistemological fault line concerns the role of language and power in constructing knowledge. Humanities scholars, especially those influenced by poststructuralism and critical theory, have long argued that knowledge is not a neutral reflection of reality but a discursive construction shaped by power relations (Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1976). This insight has profound implications for the social sciences, which have historically aimed to produce objective, value-free knowledge.

By exposing how language encodes ideologies, normalises hierarchies, and silences dissent, humanities scholarship invites a critical re-evaluation of social scientific categories such as “development,” “rationality,” or “objectivity.” Scholars like Pierre Bourdieu (1991) have demonstrated that even the most technical fields—like economics or education—are underpinned by symbolic power and classificatory struggles.

Conversely, the social sciences provide robust methodologies for empirically documenting how power operates in institutions, policies, and social practices. Thus, when the humanities' critical sensitivity to discourse and meaning is combined with the social sciences' analytical tools for mapping structures and outcomes, a more nuanced and ethically attuned epistemology becomes possible.

**6. Towards an Integrated Framework: Rethinking Disciplinary Boundaries**

The preceding analyses have highlighted the historical tensions and methodological divergences between the humanities and the social sciences and the productive overlaps that have generated new modes of inquiry, critical insight, and transformative praxis. In this section, the discussion turns toward the possibility of epistemological integration: not in flattening the differences between disciplines, but rather in cultivating a pluralist framework where diverse methodologies and interpretive traditions coexist and enrich one another.

This integration is not merely desirable; it is increasingly imperative in a world characterised by systemic crises—climate change, global inequality, technological disruption, and the erosion of democratic norms—that resist analysis from a single disciplinary lens. Thus, this section explores key theoretical approaches, institutional models, and pedagogical strategies that offer pathways toward a more holistic and integrated approach to understanding society.

**6.1 Critical Realism: Bridging Ontology and Epistemology**

Critical realism is one of the most promising philosophical frameworks for integrating the humanities and social sciences, as developed by Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1998). Critical realism asserts that the social world, like the natural world, exists independently of our perceptions. However, our knowledge of it is theoretically mediated, partial, and always subject to revision. This framework distinguishes between the real (underlying structures and mechanisms), the actual (events that occur), and the empirical (what we observe or experience), thereby providing space for both explanatory models and interpretive accounts.

Critical realism acknowledges the socially constructed nature of knowledge; unlike positivism and radical constructivism, it maintains that there is a world beyond discourse. This ontological depth allows for a multi-level analysis that appreciates causality and meaning simultaneously. For example, in studying poverty, a critical realist would explore both the structural conditions (e.g., economic systems, policy frameworks) and the subjective narratives (e.g., lived experience, cultural stigma) that constitute its reality (Sayer, 2000).

Thus, Critical realism offers a philosophical middle ground that resists methodological individualism and epistemic relativism, enabling researchers to combine quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive methods in a coherent analytical framework.

**6.2 Transdisciplinarity: From Dialogue to Integration**

Where interdisciplinarity suggests collaboration across established disciplines, transdisciplinarity calls for a more radical rethinking of disciplinary boundaries altogether (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, 2001). It emerges in response to the intractable, complex problems that transcend disciplinary expertise—what some scholars term “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In a transdisciplinary model, knowledge production is not confined to academic silos but includes multiple epistemologies, including indigenous knowledge systems, public expertise, and community-based research.

The transdisciplinary ethos is ecological rather than hierarchical, privileging connectivity, adaptability, and reflexivity. For instance, contemporary work in health humanities brings together clinical data, patient narratives, and cultural theory to rethink health not merely as a biological condition but as a social and ethical phenomenon (Brody, 2011; Crawford et al., 2020). Similarly, urban studies integrate architecture, anthropology, literature, and environmental science to understand the city as both a material infrastructure and a site of symbolic production (Amin & Thrift, 2002).

Transdisciplinarity also challenges the binary of academic versus applied research by calling for action-oriented knowledge to inform policy, empower communities, and foster social transformation. It is thus not only a methodological imperative but an ethical one, demanding that scholarship engage with the world rather than stand apart from it (Leavy, 2011).

**6.3 Pedagogical Innovations: Teaching Across the Divide**

Institutional efforts toward integration must be matched by pedagogical innovation that trains students to think critically across disciplinary boundaries. Traditional university curricula, structured by faculty divisions and degree specialisations, often discourage integrative thinking. However, emerging models in liberal arts education, problem-based learning, and interdisciplinary degrees challenge this paradigm.

For example, courses on global development, climate justice, or human rights increasingly draw from literature, sociology, philosophy, political science, and economics to frame their inquiry. Such curricula do not merely juxtapose disciplinary perspectives but actively foster the ability to synthesise diverse epistemologies (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009). Furthermore, teaching students to navigate both statistical analysis and narrative interpretation equips them with a versatile intellectual toolkit well-suited for addressing the uncertainties of the 21st century.

One model gaining traction is the capstone project, where students address a real-world problem by drawing on multiple disciplines and methods. This not only cultivates epistemic agility but also reflects the actual structure of knowledge in the world—where economic data, cultural narratives, institutional structures, and personal experiences are inextricably intertwined.

**6.4 Ethical and Political Stakes of Integration**

Finally, the drive toward an integrated humanities–social sciences framework must contend with knowledge production's ethical and political stakes. As Foucault (1980) reminds us, all knowledge is entangled with power. Who defines the research agenda? Who is authorised to speak? What kinds of knowledge are funded, published, or institutionalised?

Integration must not mean colonising one domain by another, nor should it reproduce epistemic hierarchies that marginalise non-Western, subaltern, or indigenous ways of knowing. Instead, the integration must be guided by a commitment to epistemic justice—recognising diverse knowledge traditions as legitimate and valuable in their own right (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2014).

This is especially crucial in postcolonial and Global South contexts, where the legacy of epistemic extractivism has historically positioned Western science as the arbiter of truth. An integrated framework must, therefore, be decolonial in spirit and practice, committed to dialogical knowledge production, plurality, and all communities' right to define the terms of their reality.

**7. Conclusion: Reimagining the Nexus of Meaning and Method in Understanding Society**

The quest to understand society in all its complexity demands more than disciplinary allegiance, methodological orthodoxy, or epistemological insularity. This paper has sought to illuminate the dynamic interplay between meaning and method, as embodied in the evolving relationship between the humanities and the social sciences. Far from being a tale of dichotomy and division, this nexus represents a fertile ground for intellectual cross-pollination, critical synthesis, and epistemic innovation.

Beginning with a conceptual framing of the humanities and social sciences as distinctive yet complementary traditions, the analysis traced the historical trajectories that gave rise to disciplinary boundaries—shaped by the Enlightenment project, positivist ambitions, and the institutionalisation of knowledge in the modern university (Foucault, 1970; Porter, 1995). While these divisions have often been reinforced through pedagogical structures and research paradigms, the increasing complexity of social phenomena has gradually eroded rigid epistemic borders, making space for new forms of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary thinking.

Through case studies in gender studies, postcolonial thought, environmental humanities, and digital scholarship, the paper demonstrated how contemporary knowledge production frequently draws on both the interpretive richness of the humanities and the analytical rigour of the social sciences. These examples illustrated that explanation and interpretation, generalisability and particularism, objectivity and reflexivity are not binary oppositions but dialectical tensions that can and should be held in productive suspension.

The discussion of epistemological tensions made clear that integration is not merely a technical challenge but a philosophical and ethical one. It requires confronting assumptions about what counts as knowledge, who has the authority to produce it, and for whom knowledge is created. These questions are particularly salient in a global context marked by postcolonial legacies, epistemic exclusions, and the urgent need for inclusive knowledge systems (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2014). Integrating the humanities and social sciences must be oriented toward methodological pragmatism and epistemic justice.

To that end, the paper explored potential frameworks for integration. Critical realism offers a meta-theoretical model that reconciles causal explanation with interpretive depth, while transdisciplinary paradigms urge a more inclusive and pragmatic approach to complex problem-solving (Bhaskar, 1998; Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, 2001). Pedagogical innovation, including interdisciplinary curricula and problem-based learning, provides concrete strategies for cultivating a new generation of scholars capable of thinking beyond disciplinary silos. These frameworks point not to a flattening of epistemological differences but to strategic pluralism, where diverse methods and perspectives can coexist and collaborate meaningfully.

In this light, the divide between the humanities and the social sciences should be reimagined not as a barrier but as a threshold—a generative space of intellectual negotiation and creativity. At this threshold, we find the tools to grapple with the most pressing challenges of our time: climate crisis, systemic inequality, technological governance, cultural polarisation, and the erosion of democratic norms. None of these phenomena can be fully understood—or addressed—without the narrative nuance of the humanities and the systematic insight of the social sciences working in tandem.

Ultimately, understanding society is not merely measuring it or interpreting it in isolation but embracing a multi-modal, critically reflexive, and ethically engaged mode of inquiry. As we move further into the 21st century, the challenge for scholars, educators, and institutions is not simply to bridge the gap between meaning and method but to recognise that the most transformative knowledge emerges in the space between—where disciplines converge, where paradigms interact, and where the full richness of the human condition is brought into view.

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