Choosing to be a social scientist in the 21st century

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- I was asked to provide some advice for economists who start their careers in academia.
- This is part of an earlier essay I wrote for the COSME Newsletter, which in turn was inspired by an essay that neuroscientist Ramón y Cajal wrote in Spain 115 years ago.

Focus on original research

- There can be many distractions in a department. Your sense of discipline can be a liability to your career and for that matter to the success of your department.
- Forget about economic journalism, consulting, and the like. Perhaps you can indulge in these activities at an older age but not at the start of your career as a researcher.
- This is not to say that you should not be a responsible member of the profession who cares about public goods, but those goods and not research should be the residual claimant on your time.
- After all, original research is the most important public good that you can contribute.

Choose topics that you are really motivated about

- Remember Ken Robinson's dictum on how finding your passion changes everything.
- Sometimes a researcher only regains her childhood spontaneity and freedom of enquiry after her 40s. Don't let this happen to you.
- If childhood spontaneity is an essential ingredient of scientific enquiry, it is even more so in the case of social science.
- This is so because our enquiries are often about realities that are so familiar to us that we find it difficult to detect new angles on what needs to be understood.

Do not be afraid of looking for questions rather than methods

- Historically economics has been dominated by methods, but this is no longer so.
- A great thing of modern economics is that it has increasingly become an empirical science in that people actually formulate hypothesis and look for answers to questions in data, and can be surprised (and convinced) by the results.
- In addition to theory and ideas, now the empirical findings also matter.

Work hard

- As a norm no good research will come out without a lot of work. If your research is not your passion it is unlikely that you will find the strength to work hard enough.
- Cold calculation of costs and benefits is unlikely to take you very far. But if your research is your passion no one will be more demanding on your work than yourself.
- Do not bother too much about formalities and issues of presentation. Presentation matters but a good presentation can never substitute for a weak research content.
- This advice may sound counter to standard mentoring. Obviously a good introduction matters and exposure too, but there is a trade-off and I want to state the fact that in the end we care about the substance of the research.

Research is not for everyone

- Being a researcher is like being an artist. Not everyone enjoys being an artist.
- Some people really want to be able to imagine a more structured path to their lives than artistry can provide.
- If this is your case, follow your inclination and move on into something else.

Be prepared to retool every now and then

- Economics is undergoing fast changes as our discipline has become more diverse and economists focus on a much broader set of questions than before.
- No longer is there a single mainstream. It is a time to be watchful about new developments and willing to invest and change track when needed.
- The days when you could expect to pursue a research career based on your PhD training alone are long gone.
- Regular retraining is to be expected. Dedicating time later in your career to retrain in depth is a good thing if it opens up new fruitful lines of research for you.
- Avoid classifying yourself too narrowly because subfields themselves are being reshaped and reclassified all the time.

Advice from Ramón y Cajal to a young researcher

- Cajal's advice of 1898 remains surprisingly modern. Let me list some of the items that I find relevant for a young social scientist.

Perseverance

- Many efforts get nowhere because the researcher gives up too early. If you behave with a mentality of a bureaucrat counting the hours you put into a project you will fail.

Beginner's traps

- First, undue admiration of authority. Having heroes is a source of inspiration but may lead to sterility (and disappointment).
- Second, the belief that the most important problems are already solved. In fact, the opposite is true. Do not think of economics as a beautifully finished construction. The most important developments are still to come.
- Third, devotion to "practical" science. Be careful about wanting a policy implication of any modest piece of research. Understanding cannot be tied to practical implications but there is no practical science without understanding.

Need for specialization

- Ramón y Cajal warns against encyclopedic learning, "the end point of disperse, restless minds who lack discipline and are unable to concentrate attention on a single idea for any length of time. Rotating inclinations may create great writers, delightful conversationalists, and illustrious orators, but rarely scientific discoverers."