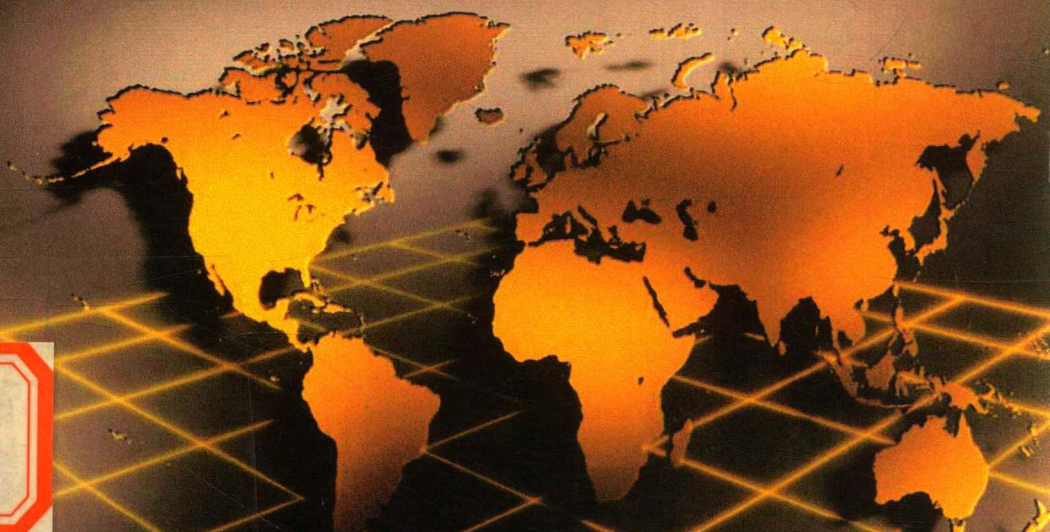# GLOBAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

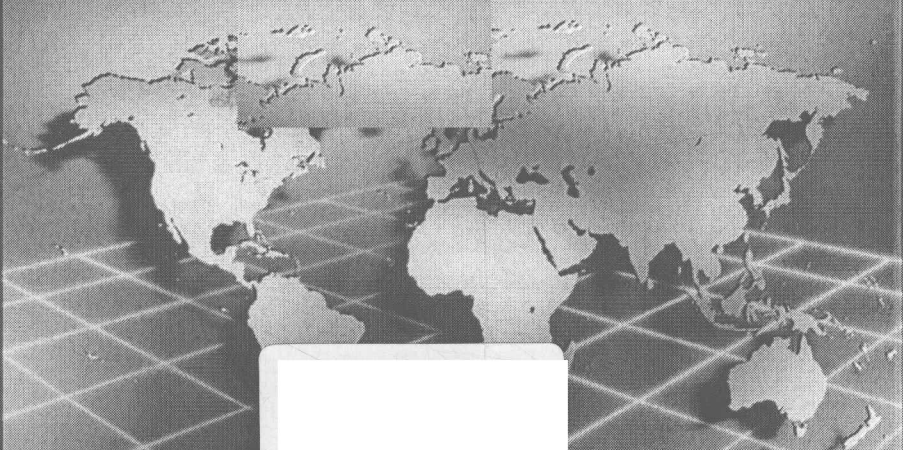## A Critical Theory Perspective

Thomas O'Toole

and contributions by

Gail Frances Hughes

GLOBAL
SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Acknowledgments

Preface

All of us in the twenty-first century will need to know about, use, and process substantive content drawn from the social sciences. As citizens of the most powerful nation in the world, we need to make critical selections and plan ways to respond to global issues. The critical analysis of global issues is a necessary part of our education if we are to play an active role as citizens in the global community. The issues I have chosen here are relevant, real, and immediate. Their critical analysis can help provide meaningful bridges to life in and out of school. With the help of this text we can begin to develop a continuing interest in the analysis of long-term global issues and enhance the ability to evaluate the information that flows from the mass media. Critical analysis and evaluation of real global issues is a necessary part of education today.

We do not live in isolation from the rest of the world. As transportation and communications improve, the world becomes our back yard. Live telecasts, from everywhere on the earth, bring the world into our homes and classrooms. Migration for such reasons as marriage, jobs, religion, political persecution, wars, and famines have changed ethnic, social, religious, and political groups throughout the world. It is not difficult to find someone from almost any other country in an average-sized U.S. town. This is a point to remember, whatever your future occupation may be, you will need to be able to critically analyze complex global realities.

Global issues and events of the day are of concern to all informed citizens. It is important that we learn how to become informed and how to participate in the issues that concern us. Usually we cannot directly affect global issues, but as citizens in a democracy, we are called upon to choose persons and policies that do. We need to develop the critical and analytic skills to meet the challenges facing the global community in the future. I have written this book to help you develop the social responsibility skills that build a solid foundation for a responsible global citizenry. The most important thing I can help you learn is how to make intelligent decisions. By addressing real global issues as classroom content, we seek to make critical analysis part of our lives.

People throughout the world are beginning to speak out against waste and pollution. Some of them are even questioning the value of consuming more and more. They are beginning to see how the burden of debt falls upon innocent people in families and communities, and realize how inhumane trade and financial policies snatch away the hard-earned livelihoods and health of the most vulnerable people caught up in the global economy. Today, there is even a growing resistance among some of us to rushing blindly into war. The search for peaceful solutions to conflict continues.

Dr. Hughes and I hope we will challenge you to take up the task of questioning the blind acceptance of violence and exploitation as solutions to global problems. We hope we will convince you to learn about possibilities for sustainable development within the limitations of the earth's environment and for sustainable livelihoods for all women, men, families, and communities. We hope you will accept the need to challenge the myths of rugged individualism, the priority that has too long been given to profit over human needs, and the simplistic view that violence is a solution to international conflict. At the very least we hope you will learn to think about and to critically analyze much of what we take for granted in the world around us.

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INTRODUCTION

Every day we come across news items such as: "Persons creating U.S. immigration laws increase discrimination by employers against people of Hispanic ancestry or Asian origins," or "Global free trade promotes democracy and increases the standard of living around the world." Ideally these items are the result of critical analysis and social science research. If immigration laws are written in ways that violate people's rights, social science analysis may lead to changes in these laws. If questions about global 'free trade' are critically analyzed, alternative views raised by environmentalists, supporters of social justice, and politically aware working people may be considered.

This book begins with an introduction to the method social scientists use to find answers about social questions. (see 1-1) Social scientists use the scientific method to seek greater understanding about the social world.

1-1
METHODS IN THE MADNESS

Social scientists are people who have prepared themselves to understand human societies in disciplined ways. This means that most of what social scientists find and say about the social phenomena they study occurs within rather specific scientific frames of reference.

You will not become a critical analytic social scientist just by reading this book. It can assist you to understand how social scientists work, to support your efforts to do some critical analytic thinking yourself, and to become a better consumer of social science information. You will understand much about critical social science analysis and what it can and cannot be used for, as well as learn about issues social scientists critically analyze in a global society.

Ways of Knowing

Most of what you have learned about the social world has not been through social science. Social science is only one process for producing knowledge about the social world. It is a more structured, organized, and systematic process of gaining knowledge than most other ways. Knowledge from these other ways can often be quite reasonable, but knowledge based

on critical social science analysis is more likely to be verifiable and have fewer errors. You do not gain a perfect knowledge of global social issues this way. Nevertheless, compared to the alternatives, some of which I consider below, critical social science ways of analyzing social events are less likely to be flawed.

Authority: You gain knowledge from parents, teachers, and experts. When you accept something as being so just because someone in a position of authority says it is so, you are using authority as a basis of knowledge. Relying on the wisdom of authorities has advantages — it is a quick and easy way to learn something. Authorities often spend time and effort to learn something, and you can benefit from their experience and work.

Relying on authorities also has limitations. It is easy to overestimate the expertise of other people. You may assume that their information is accurate when it is not. Authorities may speak about fields they know little about; they can be plain wrong. An expert in one area may try to use his or her authority in an unrelated area. You have, no doubt, seen television commercials where an expert in football uses that expertise to try to convince you to buy a car. In addition, there are questions of who is or who is not an authority, and in whom you should have confidence when authorities disagree. History is full of past experts whom we now see as being misinformed.

Some 'experts' in the past, for example, measured intelligence by counting bumps on the skull. Their errors seem obvious now, but you can be certain that many of today's experts will be tomorrow's fools. Too much reliance on authorities can be dangerous to a democratic society. An over-dependence on experts could allow them to promote ideas that simply strengthen their power and position. When we have no idea of how the experts arrived at their knowledge, we lose some of our ability to make judgments for ourselves.

Tradition: People sometimes rely on tradition for knowledge. Tradition is a special case of authority — the authority of the past. Tradition means you accept something as being so because 'it's the way things have always been.' For example, many people believe that children who are raised at home by their mothers grow up to be better adjusted and have fewer personal problems than those raised in other settings. People 'know' this, but cannot explain how they know it. Most accept it, but few have ever verified it. They are convinced (rightly or wrongly) that it was true in the past or is the

way things have always been done. Some traditional social knowledge begins as simple prejudice. A belief such as 'people from that side of the tracks will never amount to anything' is passed on as traditional belief.

Common Sense: You know a lot about the social world from your ordinary reasoning or common sense. You rely on what everyone knows and what 'just makes sense.' For example, it 'just makes sense' that murder rates are higher in nations that do not have a death penalty, because people are less likely to kill if they face execution for doing so. This and other widely held 'common sense' beliefs, such as that poor youth are more likely to commit deviant acts than those from the middle class, are false.

Common sense is valuable in daily living, but it can allow logical fallacies to slip into your thinking. For example, the 'gambler's fallacy' says: 'If I have a long string of losses playing a lottery, the next time I play, my chances of winning will be better.' In terms of probability and the actual happening, this is false. Common sense is useful and sometimes corresponds to reality, but common sense also contains errors, misinformation, contradiction, and prejudice.

Personal Experience: If something happens to you, if you personally see it or experience it, you accept it as true. Personal experience, or 'seeing is believing,' has a strong impact and is a forceful source of knowledge. Unfortunately, personal experience can lead you astray. Something similar to an optical illusion or a mirage can occur. What appears true may actually be due to a slight error or distortion in judgment. The power of immediacy and direct personal contact is very strong. Even knowing that, people sometimes make mistakes or fall for illusions. Sometimes people believe what they see or experience, rather than what has been validated by careful scientific research designed to avoid such errors.

Personal experience errors reinforce each other and can occur in other areas as well. Here I examine four errors that occur most often.

1. The first problem, which is the most frequent, is *overgeneralization.* This occurs when people have evidence that they believe and then assume that it applies to many other situations, too. Some generalization may be appropriate; under certain conditions, a small amount of evidence can explain a larger situation. The problem is that people often generalize well beyond limited evidence. People know little about many individuals, areas, and situations. So generalizing from the little they do know might seem reasonable.

For example, over the years, we have known five blind people well. All of them were very friendly. We cannot, though, conclude that all blind people are friendly. The five people with whom we had personal experience do not represent all blind people.

2. A second common error is *selective observation*. This occurs when you take special notice of some people or events and generalize from them. People often focus on or observe particular cases or situations, especially when they fit preconceived ideas. We often seek out evidence that confirms what we already know or believe and ignore the range of cases and contradictory information. We are sensitive to features that confirm our ideas — features that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, we might believe obese people are good dancers. We observe overweight people and, without awareness, pay particular attention to their dancing abilities. Without realizing it, we notice and remember people and situations that reinforce our preconceived ideas. We 'over-interpret' a few graceful steps, pay less attention to contradictory evidence, and do not look for 'clumsy' dancers among overweight people.

3. *Premature closure* is yet another common error. It often operates with and reinforces the first two errors. Premature closure occurs when people feel they have all the answers and do not need to listen, seek information, or raise questions any longer. Furthermore, most people use everyday experiences a little too loosely. We take a few pieces of evidence or look at events for a short while and then think we have it figured out. We look for evidence to confirm or reject an idea and stop when a small amount of evidence is present. In short, we jump to conclusions. We know three people who smoked six packs of cigarettes a day and lived to be over 80 years old. We might, therefore, conclude that people who smoke lots of cigarettes would live past the age of eighty.

4. The last error we point out here is the *halo effect*. It comes in many forms, but basically, we 'over-generalize' from what we interpret to be highly positive or prestigious. We give things or people we respect a halo, or a strong reputation. We let the prestige 'rub off' on other things or people about which we know little. Thus, we pick up a report by a person from a prestigious university, say

Harvard or Yale. We assume that the author is intelligent and talented and that the report will be excellent. We do not necessarily make this assumption about a report by someone from St. Cumulus State University. We do not approach the reports by considering them on their own merits alone.

How Science Works

The major factor that separates critical social science from other ways of knowing about the social world is that it uses a scientific approach. *Social science* is more than a collection of methods and more than a process for creating knowledge. Social science is a process for producing new knowledge about the social world using a *scientific* approach.

The social sciences, such as cultural anthropology, social psychology, political science, economics, and sociology, involve the study of groups of people — their beliefs, behavior, interaction, institutions, and so forth. Like all sciences, the social sciences frequently rely on indirect evidence, just as physicists verify the existence of subatomic particles indirectly by watching for telltale tracks that the particles leave in cloud chambers. The subject matter of the social sciences, human social life, is especially fluid, complicated to observe, and hard to measure precisely. The subject matter of any science (e.g., human attitudes, protoplasm, or galaxies) determines the techniques and instruments (e.g., surveys, microscopes, or telescopes) used by its practitioners.

Science is a social institution and a way to produce knowledge. It is a relatively recent human invention. Science arose out of a major shift in thinking that began with the Age of Reason (also called the Enlightenment period) in Western European history, beginning about four hundred years ago. New ways of thinking began in this period. These ways included a faith in logical reasoning, an emphasis on experiences in the material world, a belief in human progress, and a questioning of traditional religious authority. The Age of Reason began with the study of the natural world and spread to the study of social life. The advancement of science or fields within science, such as sociology, does not just happen. It is the result of the triumphs and struggles of individual researchers. It is also influenced by social events such as new government policies, or shifts in public support.

Scientists gather data using specialized techniques and use the data to support or reject theories. Data are the evidence or information that one

gathers carefully according to rules or procedures. The data can be quantitative (i.e., expressed as numbers) or qualitative (i.e., expressed as words, pictures, objects). Since social science researchers cannot always use their senses (touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste) directly to observe many aspects of the social world about which they seek answers (e.g., intelligence, attitudes, opinions, feelings, emotions, power, authority, etc.), they use many specialized techniques to observe and indirectly measure such aspects of the social world.

Steps of Social Science Research

Through my college and university years (1960s and early 1970s) most social scientists in the United States used linear models of scientific inquiry (proceeding step by step in a straight line) as guidelines for collecting, checking, classifying, and analyzing data. Today there are many different types of research, many different approaches, and theoretic perspectives. Nevertheless it is still useful to begin with an example of the positivist approach to social science [1] as a basis for later discussions. While groups of people may be more difficult to study than atoms, paramecia, or ozone gas, we continue to apply some of the same scientific methods in studying humans that physical scientists use. The rules of this scientific process follow a loosely structured set of procedures known as the *scientific method*. What follows is a very simplified but fairly typical exposition of a series of steps in this method.

- Select a general area to be researched and review the existing literature about this subject;
- Define the problem, form a specific hypothesis, and develop it into a researchable question within some explanatory theory;
- Construct a research design applying techniques that would measure data relevant to the proposed hypothesis;
- Collect data to test the hypothesis;
- Organize and analyze the data gathered;
- Draw conclusions evaluating the hypothesis, generalize from the results of the study, and suggest new research;
- Report the findings.

This reporting step is so obvious that we might take it for granted. Social science, like all science, only works if information is shared so that the scientific community can check the validity of the process and the

conclusions reached. Like all scientists, social scientists make their research available so that other social scientists can review and evaluate the findings. A critical part of science's self-correcting mechanism is such peer review. Social scientists are careful about giving accurate citations of sources to facilitate this review and the cross-checking of research. When social scientists have found data to support their hypotheses, they still continue research to test further their hypotheses. Scientific knowledge is neither absolute nor unchanging. It must always be viewed as tentative and must continually be tested, evaluated, and revised.

The Social Sciences

You can think of social science as the use of scientific methods to transform ideas, hunches, and questions (sometimes called *hypotheses*) about groups of humans into scientific knowledge. In this book I seek to help you understand the transformative process of social science. *Transformation* means altering something, converting it from one thing into another. Social scientists start with puzzles and apply specialized methods and techniques to these raw materials. Their goals are to obtain validated knowledge.

The social sciences all evolved from moral or social philosophy to study scientifically how people behave in the socio-cultural world that they create (as opposed to the physical world into which they are born). These disciplines have all developed their own distinct patterns within the past 250 years, although their subject matter has occupied philosophers for thousands of years. Each of the social sciences separated from common roots in social philosophy as their practitioners began using the scientific method in specialized ways. Though each of the social science disciplines described here can be studied individually, our goal is to assist you to develop an integrative, critical, global, and interdisciplinary approach to the social sciences. I am convinced that no single social science offers a conceptual schema that allows us to understand the whole context of human experience. By synthesizing the various disciplines, perhaps we can evolve the integrated outlook necessary to help grasp the complexities of contemporary global societies. Only integrated global social science perspectives will serve as overarching constructs into which you can fit all the separate social sciences. By organizing the various social sciences into global interdisciplinary frames, we will create a new type of social scientist

who will be better able to address the major social issues facing the contemporary world.

Anthropology: Anthropology, as its name in Greek implies (*anthropos*), is the study of humans, both males and females. As such, it is potentially the most comprehensive of the social sciences, although strictly speaking, one branch, *physical anthropology,* which is concerned with people's biological and physical characteristics, is a biological, not a social science. Social or cultural anthropology is definitely a social science. Though difficult to distinguish from some forms of sociology, the tendency to use participant observation, field study techniques, and focus on the concept of culture (especially in small scale societies) continues to set social or cultural anthropology apart from some mainstream North American sociologists. Like historians, anthropologists are more likely than some other social scientists to confront themselves with rich, dense, specific data on many aspects of people's lives in concrete settings. This makes them sometimes resistant to theories and methods that demand great abstractions from such concrete specificity. It also makes them especially sensitive to issues of difference among peoples and ways of life. This does not mean that anthropology is purely descriptive. No attempt at scientific description is untainted by theory, just as no good social science lacks sensitivity to time (history), place (geography), and patterns of discontinuity and change.

The greatest contribution of anthropology to the social sciences is the concept of *culture*. This key concept has illuminated all the disciplines concerned with the study of human group life. Generally, anthropologists argue that humans differ from most other animals in that humans have culture that is, to a large extent, dependent on our capacity to comprehend and communicate by means of language. Culture, according to anthropologists, is socially learned and includes the common patterns, ways of living, knowledge, beliefs, and values that humans have created over time to establish rules of group life and methods of adjusting to and utilizing natural and social environments. What makes culture so important is that it can be altered rapidly to cope with new conditions, and allows people in very diverse societies to adopt and adapt ideas from other cultures. Social or cultural anthropologists try to describe and explain a great many things: child rearing and education; family arrangements; language and communication; technology; ways of obtaining food, clothing and shelter; the distribution of work; religious beliefs and values; social life; and leadership patterns, for example.