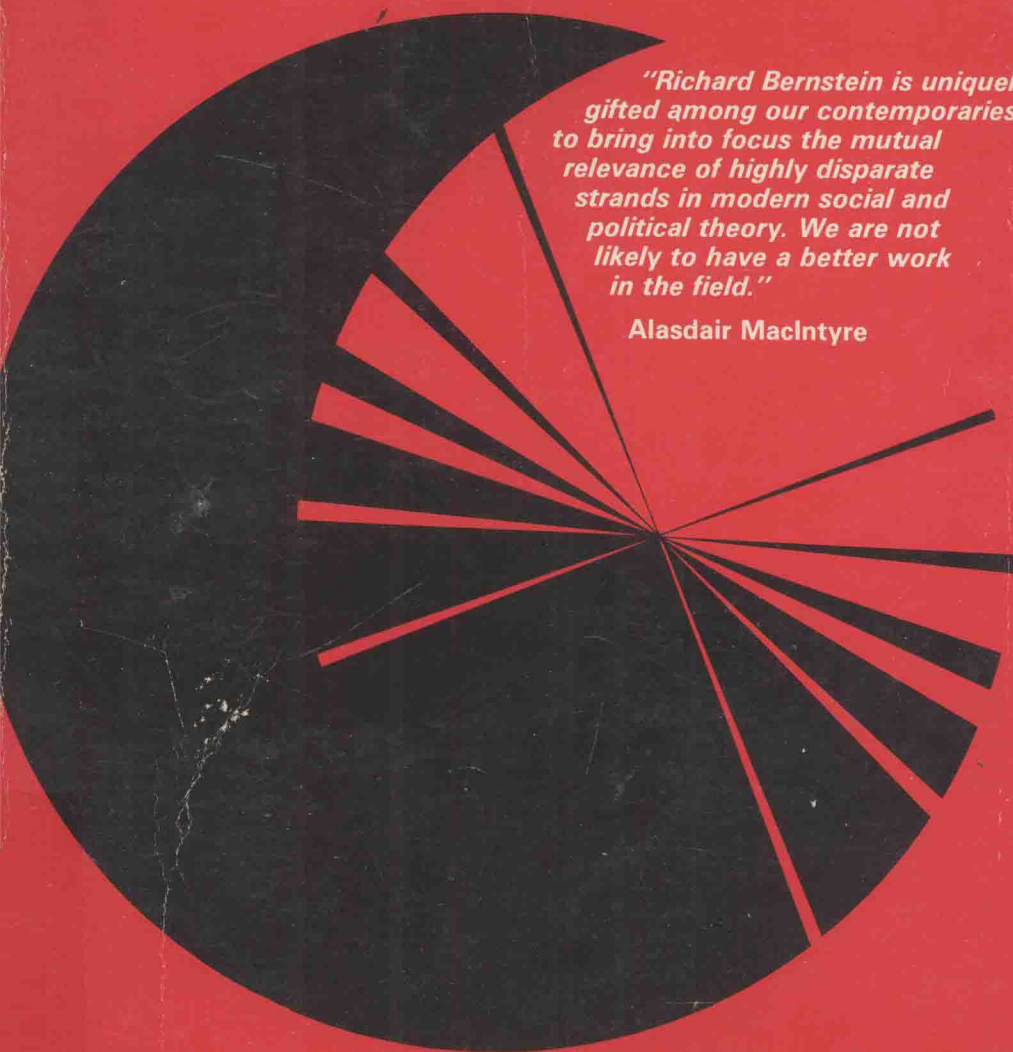


THE RESTRUCTURING OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY

**RICHARD J.
BERNSTEIN**

*"Richard Bernstein is uniquely
gifted among our contemporaries
to bring into focus the mutual
relevance of highly disparate
strands in modern social and
political theory. We are not
likely to have a better work
in the field."*

Alasdair MacIntyre



RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

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Books by Richard J. Bernstein

Praxis and Action

John Dewey

EDITED BY RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

Perspectives on Peirce

John Dewey: On Experience, Nature, and Freedom

**For
Daniel, Jeffrey, Andrea,
and Robin**

Acknowledgments

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I started writing this book at the desk used by Michael Ventris in Hampstead, London, and completed it in Jay, New York, overlooking the Adirondack Mountains. The *genii loci* do not always provide a source of inspiration, but in this instance they did.

Richard J. Bernstein

Introduction

During the nineteen sixties when I was working on my book, *Praxis and Action*, I had a profound sense that something new was stirring—something was changing—in the patterns, emphases, and concerns of intellectual life. I dimly perceived that, despite the sharp differences and lack of effective communication among contemporary intellectual orientations, there are fundamental themes to which post-Hegelian movements are constantly and ineluctably drawn. These focused on the centrality of the concepts of praxis and action in the quest to gain a depth understanding of the human condition. I set out to examine the centrality of the themes of praxis and action in four contemporary movements: Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism, and analytic philosophy. But I limited myself primarily to clarifying what each of these diverse approaches contributed to our understanding of human activity. This is why I concluded the study by declaring that it was only a beginning.

When I completed the manuscript, a fresh debate was taking place in which many of the issues that I had been exploring came alive in novel and unexpected ways. One of the consequences of the social and political unrest and protest of the nineteen sixties was a series of attacks on, and radical critiques of, the very foundations of the social disciplines. Just as the end of ideology was being proclaimed in America—when there was a widely shared self-confidence among mainstream social scientists that their disciplines had finally been placed upon a firm empirical foundation where we could expect the steady progressive growth of scientific knowledge of society—troubling issues broke out.

There were those who declared that the very foundations of the social sciences were rotten; that, more often than not, what was supposed to be objective scientific knowledge was in fact a disguised form of ideology that lent support to the status quo; that the most striking characteristic of the social sciences was not their ability to illuminate existing social and political reality, but their inability to provide any critical perspective on what was happening; that the thinking exhibited in these disciplines gave a false legitimacy to the social technical control and manipulation that was infecting all aspects of human life. There was a growing skep-

ticism and suspicion about the liberal faith so entrenched in the social disciplines: the belief that increased systematic empirical understanding of how society and politics work would naturally lead to the intelligent formulation of policies, ameliorate social inequities and injustices, and enable us to solve the problems of society. Even the staunchest defenders of value-free, objective empirical research acknowledged that something was not quite right with their disciplines, although this was frequently ascribed to the youth and immaturity of the social sciences.

More disturbing to professionals than the criticism of outsiders, who could be written off as an uninformed, disenchanted fringe, was the growing criticism of insiders. Presumably the battle in gaining recognition of the social disciplines as genuine sciences had been won. It was reasonable to expect that a new generation of professional students, trained in the most sophisticated quantitative and empirical techniques of research, would carry on the work of furthering the scientific maturity of the social disciplines. Yet it was from these insiders that the greatest dissatisfaction and the most vociferous criticism was heard. Many of the leaders of student protest movements throughout the world were themselves students of the social sciences. Their criticism of society was intimately bound up with their criticism of their own disciplines.

Alternative approaches which had been judged irrelevant, moribund, refuted, or passé suddenly took on a new vitality. Themes worked out in the pure conceptual inquiries of linguistic philosophy were used to challenge the epistemological foundations of the social sciences. New developments in the history and philosophy of science posed a threat to the very conception of scientific knowledge and theory that had been uncritically accepted by social scientists. Phenomenology and hermeneutics, which "tough-minded" empiricists had viewed with suspicion as "tender-minded" woolly foreign intrusions, struck many young thinkers as providing a more genuine and perspicuous insight into social relations than did the weary formulas of those who prided themselves on meticulous, rigorous empirical research. Marxism, which has been pronounced dead or definitely refuted more often than any other contemporary theoretical or practical movement, exhibited a new international vigor.

The initial impression one has in reading through the literature in and about the social disciplines during the past decade or so is that of sheer chaos. Everything appears to be "up for grabs." There is little or no consensus—except by members of the same school or subschool—about what are the well-established results, the proper research procedures, the important problems, or even the most promising theoretical approaches to the study of society and politics. There are claims and counterclaims, a virtual babble of voices demanding our attention.

The polemic and debates so evident in the nineteen sixties were not limited to the narrow academic issue of the status of the social disciplines. The fierceness of these debates reflects a concern with deeper and more general issues. When individuals sense that they are living through a period of crisis, when foundations seem to be cracking and orthodoxies breaking up, then a public space is created in which basic questions about the human condition can be raised anew. My primary objective in this study is to clarify, explore, and pursue these more fundamental issues. I hope to show that in what might otherwise seem a parochial and intra-mural debate about the social sciences, primary questions have been raised about the nature of human beings, what constitutes knowledge of society and politics, how this knowledge can affect the ways in which we shape our lives, and what is and ought to be the relation of theory and practice.

Many social scientists believe that with the apparently quieter seventies, much of the confusion of the nineteen sixties has happily passed. Those who view society as a complex dynamic equilibrium to be understood by a "structural-functional model," or who think that the new, more advanced "general systems" approach enables us to comprehend how society *really* works, look back upon this period as one of temporary stress and strain where the "steering mechanism" had to be readjusted. They say, let the noisy critics—who are becoming fewer and fewer—shout that this is all "bourgeois ideology." If we are responsible, serious, and honest we will be modest and realistic in our tentative claims, but firm in our conviction that patient empirical work will increase our scientific understanding of society, and can eventually achieve far more to bring about effective social reform than all the polemical tracts of so-called revolutionaries.

I do not deny that this is a prevalent attitude, especially among professionals in the social sciences, nor that weighty reasons support such an attitude. But I hope to show that such an interpretation of what has occurred in the last twenty years is fundamentally distortive. There is another reading of what has happened and what is still very much in the process of happening. When we cut beneath surface rhetoric—when we sort out what is right and wrong, what is exaggerated and what on target in the mounting criticisms of the social disciplines—we can discern the outlines of a complex argument that has been developing: an emerging new sensibility that, while still very fragile, is leading to a restructuring of social and political theory. I am using the expression "argument" in a double sense. In an older usage an argument means a plot or a story. I want to show the outlines of this plot and bring it into the foreground. But I also mean an argument in the more conventional sense of a rational

argument. We can detect, in what initially seem to be independent lines of inquiry, steps or stages in a complex argument whose total strength is greater than any of its separate strands. An adequate, comprehensive political and social theory must be at once empirical, interpretative, and critical. What I mean by this, why anything less than this is unsatisfactory, and how empirical research, interpretation, and critical evaluation dialectically involve each other, will become clearer as the underlying plot is revealed.

I did not, however, start this study with a clear thesis that I was setting out to prove. Rather I began with vague intimations and hunches that basic issues about action, society, and theory were being raised only to be smothered in polemic; and that critics and defenders of the social sciences were talking past each other. The first task was to re-examine what had become the target of so much hostility and criticism: the conviction that the social disciplines were to be properly understood as genuine natural sciences of individuals in society, differing in degree and not in kind from the well-established natural sciences. Some of the criticisms offered against the very idea of a social science modeled on the natural sciences are superficial and occasionally silly. Some critics have written as if this belief were based upon a simple or simplistic fallacy; that, for example, all of social science is a naive positivism, and since positivism has been refuted or at least severely modified, we can simply dismiss the claims of a social science that rests upon such faulty foundations. Others have argued that at the core of all social science is the acceptance of a rigid dichotomy between fact and value, and since this rigid distinction is not tenable, the whole of social science collapses. There has been a latent essentialism in some of the critical discussions of the social sciences. It is frequently assumed by critics—and defenders, too—that the idea of social science which applies natural scientific procedures to the study of society and politics involves the acceptance of “one big principle.” If this one big principle is exposed and refuted, then the whole edifice collapses, and there is no need to examine the tedious details of the several social sciences.

At a subtler level, ever since the social disciplines have been proposed as genuine *positive* sciences, opponents have advanced a variety of “impossibility,” “transcendental,” or “conceptual” arguments to prove once and for all that it is not possible to construct such a social science—that the very idea of such a social science is conceptually confused. I do not believe that any of these impossibility arguments have ever been successful, nor, for philosophic reasons, do I think there can be such a definitive a priori argument about the epistemological status of the study

of society.¹ For the past hundred years we have repeatedly gone through the tiresome ritual of having transcendental or impossibility arguments put forth about the true nature of the study of society, only to be followed by another round of counterarguments designed to show the inadequacy of these—that there are no insuperable theoretical obstacles to the construction of a positive, empirical natural science of individuals in society. Important considerations for understanding the social disciplines have emerged from these discussions, and I do not suggest that all is well with the view that the social disciplines are immature or youthful natural sciences. But statements that answer the question whether the social studies are *really* scientific, or whether there is some feature of social life that prohibits the application of scientific techniques to the study of social phenomena, tend to obscure rather than clarify critical similarities and differences between the natural sciences and the social disciplines.

What I set out to do first was to recover and articulate the understanding that mainstream social scientists have of their discipline. By “mainstream social scientists” I mean those who conceive of their discipline as one that differs in degree and not in kind from the well-established natural sciences, and who are convinced that the greatest success is to be found in emulating, modifying, and adapting techniques that have proven successful in our scientific understanding of nature. One must *not* think that “mainstream social science” is more monolithic or homogeneous than it really is. As I shall show, there are strong disagreements not only about the essential characteristics of natural science, but also about the basic similarities between the social and the natural sciences. I felt it important, however, to emphasize what practicing social scientists who are methodologically self-conscious tell us, rather than to focus exclusively on what philosophers of the social sciences say. The philosophy of the social sciences has often become a poor stepsister to the philosophy of the natural sciences, and an excuse for dealing with general epistemological issues unrelated to what actually goes on in the social disciplines.

As I will show in Part I, mainstream social scientists are convinced that their discipline is a genuine although young natural science, because of their understanding of the nature and centrality of empirical theory. It is therefore necessary to explore what precisely is meant by empirical theory; how it is to be distinguished from other types of theoretical endeavor such as so-called normative theory; and why it is thought to be so important to the scientific status of the social disciplines. We will see that for all the sharp differences among mainstream social scientists, there is a remarkable unanimity in their understanding of the episte-

mological and logical features of empirical theory, although there is a lack of any rational consensus about what satisfies or even approximates the criteria of that theory.

Only after a naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences is presented and probed, can we evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, its insights and blindnesses. I decided to concentrate on three contemporary orientations that have directly challenged the claims of a naturalistic understanding of the social disciplines. Each of these has aimed its critique at the foundations of the social sciences, and each has indicated what it takes to be a more illuminating alternative to the study of society and politics.

The first is based upon analytic philosophy, especially “the linguistic turn” taken by Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. Neither of these philosophers was primarily interested in the social disciplines, or even in the relevance of his inquiries to social theory. But many thinkers who have been influenced by them have argued that the new understanding of the complexity of language, especially the language of action, challenges the pretentious claims made by social scientists about the nature, description, and explanation of action. They have argued that there is something desperately wrong and conceptually confused in the relentless attempt to force the description and explanation of human action into the grid of empirical natural science.

Furthermore, one of the most important, controversial, and dynamic areas of recent philosophic investigation among analytic philosophers has been the history and philosophy of science. In the past few decades there has been a virtual revolution in our understanding of the “image of science”—at least when compared with the so-called orthodox understanding of science advocated by positivists and logical empiricists. Most of the work in the history and philosophy of science has dealt with the natural sciences, but it is obvious that it has important consequences for the social sciences. The very case for a naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences depends upon a clear grasp of the primary characteristics of the natural sciences, and especially the role of theory. Insofar as the new postempiricist interpretation of science has altered our understanding of the natural sciences, it affects any informed appraisal of the ways in which the social sciences are like and unlike the natural sciences. Perhaps no work has had a greater influence on recent conceptions of the social sciences than Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, despite the fact that he has scarcely discussed the social sciences. His influence has been a confusing and obfuscating one. Or rather, the fault lies primarily with the way in which his themes have

been appropriated by students of politics and society. Kuhn has been used and stretched to bolster the most disparate claims—claims that conflict and contradict each other.

The second major challenge to a naturalistic understanding of the social disciplines comes from phenomenology. Although Edmund Husserl—the founder of contemporary phenomenology—started his investigations by examining the foundations of logic and mathematics, he applied phenomenological methods to the whole domain of human experience. Of the social disciplines, he was most directly interested in psychology; in the reasons for the failures of traditional psychology, and the need to place psychology on a firm phenomenological foundation. As his philosophy developed, the nature of intersubjectivity became thematic and absolutely central to his very understanding of phenomenology.

It was, however, those influenced by Husserl who pursued the implications of phenomenology for describing and understanding social life in its full complexity. Alfred Schutz, who was originally concerned with Weber's notion of interpretative sociology, discovered in Husserl—and in Bergson, too—the intellectual tools required for clarifying the phenomenological foundations of the social disciplines. In France philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur, who borrowed freely from Husserl, turned their attention to how phenomenology can aid us to understand social reality. Recently a number of thinkers—most prominently the Italian philosopher Enzo Paci—have attempted a synthesis of Husserl and Marx. What is perhaps most striking about the influence of phenomenology on the social disciplines is that originally it had little effect on empirical work; in the past two decades, however, it has had a vital influence on empirical research, especially in sociology. There is a growing movement of phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists in both America and England; frequently they draw their inspiration from Husserl and Schutz.

The third major challenge to empirical theory, and to the conviction of mainstream social scientists that their disciplines are maturing into full-blown natural sciences, comes from the Frankfurt School of critical theory. The label “The Frankfurt School” gained popularity after the Second World War, and identified a group of thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research, which was founded in Frankfurt in 1923. Most of the members of the Institute, including the central figures of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, were strongly influenced by Hegel and Marx. During the period of their exile from Germany—which corresponded to the most creative period of the Institute—they collectively worked out the foundations of a critical theory of society which they in-

tended as an alternative to bourgeois social science on the one hand, and to doctrinaire Stalinist Marxism on the other. When the Institute was founded, one of its purposes was to engage in empirical research; during its residence in America, it was best known for its study of the authoritarian personality and mass society. But its members always viewed with deep suspicion and disdain Anglo-Saxon traditions of empiricism and American pragmatism.

After the return to Germany in 1950, the most prominent and controversial thinker to emerge from the Institute was Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, unlike the old-timers associated with the Institute, has a more subtle and comprehensive grasp of recent developments in the social sciences, analytic philosophy of science, and the philosophy of language and theoretical linguistics. He has re-examined the foundations of critical theory and sought to develop a comprehensive social theory which is a dialectical synthesis of empiricist, phenomenological, hermeneutic, and Marxist-Hegelian themes. Like Schutz and many post-Wittgensteinian analytic philosophers, Habermas has explicitly criticized the social sciences as conceived of and practiced by mainstream social scientists. He has probed epistemological issues that lie at the heart of our understanding of social reality. And he has begun the difficult task of elaborating an alternative to a naturalistic understanding of the social sciences.

Because each of these orientations is rooted in the philosophic movements that have profoundly shaped modern consciousness, and because each sets out to show what is wrong with the scientism that dominates our age—a scientism that has pernicious theoretical and practical consequences—I decided to examine them in detail. But it was never my intention to write a mere survey, or to take the stance of a presumably neutral referee scoring points for one side or the other. My major objective is to evolve a perspective from which one can integrate what is right and sound in these competing orientations, and reject what is inadequate and false.

The more I worked on and worked through this diverse body of material, the more the pieces fell into place. Gradually it became clearer that we are *not* confronted with a miscellany of critical points and ad hoc arguments coming from unrelated standpoints. My excitement grew as I discovered that, despite tensions and conflicts, there is far more coherence than I had initially anticipated.

When, for example, I explored the several critiques of analytic philosophers of the social sciences, I asked what was the alternative under-

standing of social knowledge that they were advocating. These critics kept returning to themes which have always been central for the tradition of interpretative sociology and phenomenology. It was natural therefore to explore whether phenomenology offered a clearer account of the understanding and interpretation of social reality. Further, for all the sharp disagreements between “tough-minded” empiricists, their analytic critics, and phenomenologists, there were certain framework assumptions that they shared. They advocated a conception of theory and the role of the theorist that would approximate the ideal of the disinterested observer who explains, understands, interprets, or simply describes what is. But this understanding of theory and the theorist harbored difficulties and unresolved problems that were not brought into the open. These very problems and their ramifications are the *fons et origo* of the critical theory of society.

As I pursued this inquiry, a famous passage from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* kept occurring to me. In the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes how *Wissenschaft*, or the complete systematic scientific comprehension of what is, and *Das Natürliche Bewusstsein*, or natural consciousness, initially appear to each other. From the perspective of each, the other appears to be topsy-turvy, inverted. Hegel warns us:

For science cannot simply reject a form of knowledge which is not true, and treat this as a common view of things, and then assure us that itself is an entirely different kind of knowledge, and holds the other to be of no account at all; nor can it appeal to the fact that in this other there are presages of a better. By giving that assurance it would declare its force and value to lie in its bare existence: but the untrue knowledge appeals likewise to the fact that it is, and assures us that to it science is nothing. One barren assurance, however, is of just as much value as another.²

While I reject Hegel’s claim that there is or can be a final complete *Wissenschaft*, one can draw from this passage an extremely important moral which is relevant to this inquiry. In the disputes about the status of the social disciplines, especially those based on different philosophical points of view, it appears as if we are confronted with “one barren assurance” that has “just as much value as another.” Opposing claimants write and act as if their point of view is the only correct one and the others of “no account at all.” If we are to escape from this type of intellectual skepticism, we must try to see how examining a position—what Hegel calls a form or shape of consciousness—with full integrity, how understanding it in its own terms, and probing it to locate its weaknesses and internal

conflicts, can lead us to a more adequate and comprehensive understanding. This is the dialectical movement that Hegel calls the movement from *Gewissheit* (certitude) to *Wahrheit* (truth). There is a truth to be discovered—something right about each of the forms of consciousness that Hegel explores; the task is to bring out this “truth,” which necessitates showing what is false and abstract in these several moments, and then passing beyond them to a more adequate comprehension.

So, by analogy, in our study of the competing understandings of political and social theory, it is essential to grasp each from its own internal perspective or self-understanding, and to see how its internal difficulties lead us to comprehend both its falsity or one-sidedness, and its truth. Hegel also teaches us that any serious reflection must begin with what appears to us; it is futile to condemn the common view of things as being of no account. This is why I have begun with an investigation of a naturalistic understanding of the social disciplines and its stress on empirical theory. For this is still—despite the many attacks upon it—the common view of things.

In a study that treats as many thinkers and as much diverse material as this one, questions can always be raised about the principle of selection. I am acutely aware of how much relevant material I have not discussed, and of the many alternative routes that I might have taken. The rationale for my selection of issues and themes will become clearer as I proceed, but I can give a preliminary account here. This book is written primarily for those familiar with and shaped by Anglo-Saxon intellectual traditions. I stress this because the contemporary discussion of the social disciplines, *sciences humaines*, or *Geisteswissenschaften* has taken very different forms in different cultural contexts. If, for example, I were addressing myself to the recent discussions of the *sciences humaines* in France, I would focus on the crosscurrents among phenomenologists, structuralists, poststructuralists, and the new advocates of a comprehensive semiotics. On the other hand, if I were writing for a German and Central European audience, I would have to examine the various forms of Marxism, hermeneutics, *Existenz* philosophy, and phenomenology that have shaped the discussion of the vital issues. In the United States, and to a lesser extent in other Anglo-Saxon countries, there exists a strong naturalistic tradition of the social sciences. Many practitioners have not hesitated to speak of social science as an “American” discipline, and have prided themselves on breaking away from more speculative and philosophic investigations. While I will be exploring the significance of phenomenology and the critical theory of society—both of

which have their roots in Continental traditions—I have introduced the discussion of them at those points where they claim to correct the inadequacies of a naturalistic understanding of the social sciences.

Even more important—although it would take another volume or two to establish my claim—is the fact that the same basic problems that emerge in sharp relief in Anglo-Saxon debates about the nature of the social sciences and the role of theory, are also central to Continental investigations of the *sciences humaines* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The live options that are taken seriously and the forms of discourse manifestly differ, but there is a concern with the same primary issues.

Here and throughout this study, I have spoken about the “social sciences” and “social studies.” I have already warned about the dangers of a misguided essentialism that fails to do justice to the variety and complexity of the inquiries conventionally grouped under these labels. To avoid superficiality, I have concentrated on the fields of sociology and political science. Traditionally it is within these disciplines that primary questions have been raised about the very nature and status of the social sciences, and what it means to have knowledge of society and politics. But throughout I will try to show that what I have to say about these disciplines is relevant to the full range of the social sciences.

One more warning is necessary. I have entitled this inquiry “The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory,” but there is a great deal of linguistic confusion—which reflects substantive confusion—about the meaning of “social theory” and “political theory.” Sometimes these terms are used primarily to refer to philosophical speculations about the nature of society and politics. More recently, especially as a result of the increasing interest in empirical theory, these terms are used to denote empirical theories about social and political phenomena. Most mainstream social scientists recognize a distinction between sociology and political science, but this distinction is based upon the different types of variables examined, or the typical issues explored, in these different fields. Insofar as both fields aspire to scientific maturity and to well-formulated testable explanatory theories, there are no essential or categorial differences between the “social” and the “political.” The distinction between chemistry and physics is analogous. Just as there are many areas of overlap and cross-fertilization in these natural sciences, so too in sociology and political science.

I am, however, sympathetic with those thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas who have examined the history of the concepts of the “social” and the “political,” and shown us not only how these concepts were once applied to *categorially distinct* phenomena, but