THE POLITICAL SCIENCES

General Principles of Selection in Social Science and History

Hugh Stretton

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By

HUGH STRETTON

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Preface

This book is about the mixtures of knowledge, imagination and persuasion to be found in the work of historians and social scientists. They are influential people these days. They advise and staff governments and other institutions and in rich countries they help to educate almost everybody. Most of them teach more than they discover. Their work wants watching, for its increasing social effect.

Obviously, their values affect their work. Facts are facts, but theories order them and explanations select them. The political and professional values of the scientists affect these selections, which also get political direction from technical choices of method. Some nevertheless try to purge the values from the work, and attempt other irrational imitations of the forms of physical science. These efforts are called by their critics 'scientistic'. 'Scientism' flourishes in sociology like cargo cult in Melanesia, invoking magical plenty wherever conventional production is scantiest.

Strict social scientists like to search for the regular, measurable, general and objective facts of social life. Will those principles of selection net much useful understanding of a life which is complex, changing, and sometimes perhaps freely chosen? Softer social scientists think not. What is the difference between the strict scientific methods and their softer rivals? Most of the rivals would allow practical aims and social valuations to guide the detail of the research. Some such intrusion of values is inevitable, but strict scientists keep trying to exclude them, by increasingly curious principles of selection. The worst offenders when misused, sometimes with devastating effect, are various rules of objectivity. These were meant to make observation accurate. They are misapplied to the different business of selecting concepts and identities and classes, and causes and effects.

Value-judgments seem so unscientific that even 'soft' authors are often content to confess them, and critics to detect them, so that readers can discount them. It is worth going further to see just what the valuations do and how they do it, and what the scientistic rules would do instead. It is a conclusion of this study that valuations contribute rationally and indispensably to a wide range of scientific selections and constructions, from the most 'applied' to the most 'pure'. They should be improved, not replaced. Those who teach their students otherwise, corrupt them.

Part 1 looks at the old science before the new rules troubled it much – at history, and other disciplines when they were as hospitable to ideologies and engineering interests as history is still. Part 2 introduces the rival rules of science, and Part 3 examines the rivalry in various examples of history, sociology, political science and elementary economics. 'Social' in the book's subtitle records its neglect of psychology. It adds nothing to the philosophy of history or science, though gratefully borrowing from them and taking sides in their disputes. Its method includes similar questioning of examples from book after book, with some tedious repetition of themes, but that seemed the best way to observe scientific practice and to support the theory which appeared to fit it. The examples may still interest readers who resist the theory. Even if you persist in believing that science usually corrupts values, or that values always corrupt science, it is fascinating to see in detail how they do it.

Readers who know them will see how indebted I am to theoretical works by Paul Streeten, Peter Winch, William Dray, Gunnar Myrdal, C. Wright Mills and E. H. Carr. Most of any theoretical originality is theirs and any misapplications of it are mine. I thank W. G. K. Duncan, Richard Franklin, Israel Getzler, Richard Hare, John LaNauze, Richard Southern and Donald Whitehead for very helpful criticism of passages which strayed into their fields; William Dray, Jean Martin and Jerzy Zubrzycki for advice about books to read; and the Australian National University for its hospitality. I also thank some persuaders, simultaneously clever and good as all social scientists should be, who must long ago have forgotten the occasions for this gratitude – Stephen Yarnold and Arthur Burns, Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Max Crawford, Christopher Hill, Eric Goldman and Joe Kraft.

Speaking of clever and good, my wife Pat enabled this book to be written. I thank her, most of all.

H.S.

References

Footnotes* are with the text. Where a section of text discusses a book at length, the book's title is in the text and quotations from it are followed by bracketed pages numbers (123). The remaining references are numbered thus [1] in the text, and appear at the back of the book.

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Passages are quoted from the works listed below by kind permission of the publishers, editors and authors whose names are distinguished by asterisks:

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Peter Winch*, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul*.

E. M. Winslow, *The Pattern of Imperialism*, Columbia University Press*.

Contents

Part 1 - Use

This is a study of relations between the logical forms of explanations and their social uses. Plenty has been written about their forms, but their uses have to be studied by observation of cases.

Examples for comparison are sometimes hard to find. The same scientific question is seldom approached by enough different investigators, sufficiently various in their methods and politics. So to begin with, and to sketch some models, I resort to fiction. How (otherwise than by psychologists) are the social acts of individuals explained? Chapter 1 outlines some common methods of explaining them, and in Chapter 2, besides some genuine accounts of one politician's act, other explanations of it are made up to fit the purposes of a variety of imaginary investigators, each looking for a different illumination of the same act.

The first chapter should therefore expound theory, but even that is done easier by example, so the example is introduced immediately. To keep things realistic it is a question posed by a real historian about an act of a real politician, but to keep things simple it is a minor act. The (dead) French historian's view of the (forgotten) English event has little interest now, least perhaps for any American reader. It deserves the dozen lines some general histories spare it, and a dozen pages in the politician's five-volume biography. But for his own comfort the reader is implored to raise more interest in it than that, because for the sake of science, here begin two whole chapters about it.

I

Why Men Act

1. A question

In December 1899 Joseph Chamberlain, the best known protagonist of social reform then in the British cabinet, apparently changed his mind about old age pensions. Every historian of that act has thought that it required explanation. Why?

When the Unionists came into power in 1895, two or three years had passed since the attention of the working class had been drawn to the question [of pensions for aged workmen] by Charles Booth, the philanthropist, famous for his inquiries into social conditions. The scheme proposed by Booth was, it is true, completely different from Bismarck's solution. He asserted the right of every man without exception to a pension in old age. Neither workmen nor employers were to contribute. He did not speak of insurance, but of relief. And Chamberlain had obtained the support of a group of Members of Parliament, belonging to both parties, for a carefully studied scheme, far more moderate than Booth's proposal, or even Bismarck's law – a system of optional insurance to be assisted by the State – and had again developed his proposals before a Royal Commission, appointed in 1893 to inquire into the question. The Commission, however, had in 1895 reached a purely negative conclusion. It was the same with a Parliamentary Committee appointed in 1896 which reported in 1898. But Booth's proposal suddenly acquired an unexpected importance when the Government of one of the self-governing Colonies passed legislation, based on a principle similar to that which he had enunciated. . . . The New Zealand legislation was immediately explained to the British public by the agent-general of the colony in London, the Fabian, W. P. Reeves; and Booth made use of it to push his own scheme. He launched an extensive campaign throughout Great Britain, for which he obtained the support of the trade unions, the co-operative societies, the Nonconformist bodies, twenty-seven Anglican Bishops, and Cardinal Vaughan. Three months had not passed, and his National Committee of