

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

I. Sociology in its Place

Sociology is no longer described, as some textbooks used to describe it, as a branch of knowledge discovered in the 1820s by Auguste Comte. Comte's claim to have coined the term is not disputed. But on any plausible definition of it, he was not its founder. We need not even cross the Channel: historians apart, the contributions of Smith, Malthus and Bentham to the scientific study of social institutions and behaviour are not only earlier but in some ways more important than Comte's. Yet Comte is, nevertheless, the proper starting point for this essay because he was the first to attempt a systematic exposition of the relation of the study of social institutions and behaviour to the sciences as a whole. It is true that his views were never properly founded on or tested against empirical research. As was fairly said of him by John Stuart Mill, 'it appears as if, to his mind, the mere institution of a positive science of sociology were tantamount to its completion'.¹ The ideas for which he is best known are original as much to Hegel, Saint-Simon and even, perhaps, Herbert Spencer as to himself, and his hierarchy of the sciences, which put astronomy before physics and bypassed psychology altogether, is not one which contemporary philosophers or historians of science are likely to defend in detail. But he was the first to draw proper attention to the fact (however mistaken some of the conclusions he drew from it) that the science of social institutions and behaviour as we now think of it stands at the end not only of a historical but also—and more important—of a logical series.

It may be said that all distinctions between the sciences are purely matters of convenience; and so they are. The sciences stand in relation to one another in a number of different dimensions; these relations are by no means symmetrical; and the importance of the particular distinction to be drawn depends on the particular question that the researcher may have in mind. But to say that these are matters of convenience is not to say that they can be ignored. On the contrary: it is a besetting difficulty of the social sciences that questions of this kind seem intimately bound up with the practical problems of research. The scope and status of the

¹ *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865), pp. 119–20.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

sciences of man are hard to establish satisfactorily in the absence of substantive achievements comparable to those of the sciences of nature; yet until their scope and status can be established, it remains difficult to see by what approach such achievements are best likely to be attained. I shall not, in this paper, do more than touch on the wider issues raised by an assertion of this kind: I shall assume without argument that scientific method is applicable to human behaviour, and I shall be concerned only with one aspect of the many controversies surrounding the relation of sociology to the other sciences of man. Within these limits, however, I shall argue that 'sociology' cannot be usefully distinguished in content from either anthropology or history; that it is not only a historical but an applied science in the sense that its explanations are parasitic on the laws of others; that this follows from the position which Comte himself assigned to it in the hierarchy of the sciences; and that to talk of looking for distinctive 'sociological' theories is therefore unhelpful and misconceived.

I

If this view is at all plausible, it raises an immediate question: how does it come about that sociology continues to be regarded as an autonomous subject? This question is partly logical, in the sense that there may be counter-arguments by which sociology's autonomy can be vindicated, and partly historical, in the sense that its autonomy may be the consequence of identifiable accidents of academic, or sometimes non-academic, organisation and research. To give an adequate historical answer would require a detailed discussion of the recent intellectual history of Europe and the United States such as would in any case be beyond my competence. But even a cursory look at the history of the subject in Britain reveals just how haphazard it has been. Indeed it seems almost to make the question more puzzling rather than less. So far from there ever having been a homogeneous tradition within which British sociology could be identified in terms of the common researches of its practitioners, there have for more than a century been four 'sociological' traditions (leaving historiography aside altogether) which have remained consistently separate from each other.

If labels are helpful, we might call the four traditions the evolutionary, the political-economic, the ethnographic and the administrative-reformist; or to identify them with the most obvious names, we might call them the tradition of Spencer, the tradition of Mill, the tradition of Tylor and the tradition of Booth. These labels should not be taken too strictly. But even

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

if we go back as far as the 1840s, it is already striking how clearly the four traditions seem to be marked out. By the end of that decade, Spencer had brought out his *Social Statics* and Mill his *Political Economy*, the Ethnological Society of London had been founded for seven years and publishing its regular proceedings for two, and the Statistical Society had carried out and published its detailed quantitative survey of 'The State of the Poorer Classes in St George's in the East'. A hundred and twenty years later, the four are as easily distinguishable as ever. The evolutionary tradition has passed from Spencer through the so-called Social Darwinists to Hobhouse and his successor Professor Morris Ginsberg, and then, just when it appeared to be petering out altogether, has been revived in its biological rather than its philosophical expression in a manner best exemplified in the symposium held by the Royal Society in 1966 under the chairmanship of Sir Julian Huxley on the theme of 'Ritualization in Animals and Man'. The political economy of Mill has developed through Jevons, Marshall and Keynes into the economic theory of today, shedding the 'political' along the way for it to take root and flourish as a tradition of its own. The ethnographic tradition has passed from Tylor and Frazer through Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown to Professor Evans-Pritchard and his pupils, acquiring in the process, thanks to Malinowski, a rigorous and distinctive professional technique. The administrative-reformist tradition of Sir John Simon, William Farr, the Statistical Society, the Royal Commissions and the factory inspectors has passed through Booth, Rowntree, Beveridge and the Webbs to contemporary 'Social Administration' in the manner of Professors Titmuss and Townsend. It is true that the four traditions sometimes overlapped in the past—notably in the Eugenists' combination of evolutionism, reformism, and questionable anthropology with admirably sophisticated statistical methods—and that they are in quite frequent contact at the present. The revival of the evolutionary tradition in its current form has circumvented the resistance of the ethnologists to anything which might smack of the discredited 'comparative method'; social administration is taught with increasing reference to wider social theory; economics, since becoming more and more preoccupied with problems of growth and development, has shown a greater willingness to look outside its conventional boundaries for the determinants of economic behaviour. But it would be a fruitless exercise to try to define something called 'British sociology' of which the four would be common derivatives. Although there has since 1903 been a professional association of British sociologists with all the trappings appropriate to an autonomous branch of learning, the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

circumstances of its founding hardly bear out a description of it in these terms: the fact is that 'a national society designed to promote sociology as an academic subject was the result of a temporary alliance between town-planners, eugenists, charity organisers and workers in the various social settlements'.¹ The proliferation of university appointments which has finally established sociology in Britain as an autonomous academic subject is a phenomenon of the 1950s which, so far from representing the triumph of a long-standing indigenous movement, was more the result of a conscious desire to imitate the United States. Its explanation must be sought not so much in the long and distinguished history of British social science² as in the reasons for which that history has deliberately been given an uncharacteristic turn.

It might then seem natural to try to answer the question in terms of what those who now call themselves sociologists in fact do. But this turns out to be almost as unrewarding as the attempt to answer it historically. If a general conclusion suggests itself from a survey of the teaching conducted under the heading of sociology in the major universities of Britain and the United States, it is that the subjects covered are not merely quite extraordinarily diverse but could in a great number of instances be equally well labelled something else, from economic history to statistical demography to clinical psychology to political science. It is as difficult to find a distinctive method as a distinctive content. In content, sociology as taught and practised ranges over virtually the whole field of social behaviour; in method, it can range from documentary research to participant observation to sample surveys to computer simulation. There does remain, in the great majority of universities or institutes of research, a departmental distinction between those concerned with small, preliterate societies and large industrial societies, if only because obviously different methods are appropriate to the study of each. But this hardly amounts to a difference of principle between 'sociology' and 'anthropology';

¹ R. J. Halliday, 'The Sociological Movement, the Sociological Society and the Genesis of Academic Sociology in Britain', *Sociological Review*, n.s. XVI (1968), 381.

² An interesting, and perhaps revealing, side-issue in this history has been the membership of the Royal Society by social scientists. Apart from Sir William Petty among the founding members, Malthus was an F.R.S., and so were Sir John Simon and William Farr among the administrators, Haddon, Pitt-Rivers and Seligman among the ethnographers and Jevons and Sir Robert Giffen among the economists. But the list does not extend to Marshall, Keynes, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown or Evans-Pritchard. This can largely be explained by the extent to which the work of those included was of a statistical or experimental kind, and it was in this light that the matter was in fact discussed in 1902 (see the Society's *Yearbook*, pp. 182-3—a reference which I owe to Dr H. O. Pappé). Yet why should, say, Keynes have been excluded when Seligman was elected as late as 1919?

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

it is merely a difference analogous to that between the study of England in the tenth and England in the twentieth centuries—a large difference, certainly, but not a difference between one science and another. It might, perhaps, be objected to this that my question was wrongly put in the first place, since a definition of the scope, method and content of either ‘history’ or ‘anthropology’ would turn out to be just as elusive; and perhaps it would. But the conclusion to be drawn from such an enquiry would not be that the autonomy of ‘sociology’ had been vindicated. On the contrary: it would be that sociology and history, like sociology and anthropology, come to much the same thing. If the dictum that ‘anthropology is the science among social studies’ is as old as Malinowski,¹ the dictum that ‘history is the science of human societies’ is at least as old as Fustel de Coulanges.

What, therefore, are the reasons for which sociology is so widely held to constitute an autonomous discipline? At the risk of oversimplification it can, I think, be said that there are two principal reasons which are connected to each other. Both are to be found in Comte, whether or not it is to his influence that their currency is due, and both are in part good reasons. The first is the evolutionists’ reason: as biological systems have evolved from physical systems, so have social systems evolved from biological systems, and just as there is a science of biological systems—biology—so there must be a science of social systems—sociology. The second reason is the positivists’ reason: if the explanation of human events is possible at all (and there is no good argument for thinking that in principle it is not), then there must be a corpus of laws by reference to which such explanations are vindicated, or in other words a science of societies which stands to history as pure to applied.

The evolutionists’ reason is in one sense entirely sound; social systems have indeed evolved from biological systems and the study of man’s capacity for the extra-organic transmission of information and its consequences is something very different from the study of his genetically transmitted capacities as a precultural species. What is more, social systems have properties which, although they may be reducible in principle to aggregations of the properties of the individuals composing them, must in practice be treated as predicates of the collectivity. I shall have to say something more in both this and the following section about the question of reduction. But even those who maintain that sociology is reducible in a strong sense to psychology need not be driven to conclude that sociology loses its *raison d’être* on this account, any more than the

¹ See Malinowski’s preface to Raymond Firth, *We, The Tikopia* (1937), p. xi.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

reducibility of chemistry to physics should be thought to enable universities to do without their departments of chemistry. What is more natural, therefore, than to say that sociology is the science of social systems, that its objective is to study the evolution, structure and workings of those social systems which are available to us for observation, and that the terms in which this objective is to be pursued is by establishing the law-like relations between the properties of social systems as such?

Similarly, the positivists' reason can be stated in such a way as to leave it disputable only by those who wish to deny that human behaviour is amenable at all to the orthodox procedures of observation, hypothesis, and empirical test. Once it is accepted that scientific method can be and is being applied to human behaviour, it follows that to proffer any explanation of human behaviour at all is implicitly to appeal to lawlike generalisations under which the behaviour in question could be subsumed, whether or not these are explicitly stated or even precisely known. Different sociologists (or anthropologists or historians) may look in very different places for the influences or events which they believe to be decisive, and they may try to support their attributions of cause and effect on many different types of ground. But none of them seek to argue that the behaviour they are studying is merely random. To criticise sociologists, therefore, for being unable to state the laws from which their tentative explanations of designated items or sequences of behaviour are derived may be merely to say that sociology has not yet been as successful as one day it will. And when it is, shall we not become able to turn to it for the justification of our explanations and predictions of historical events, just as two or three hundred years ago we became able to turn to celestial mechanics and its laws to justify our explanations or predictions of the complicated interplay of the heavenly bodies?

Both these considerations are plausible, but misleading. Let us agree without further discussion that there are such things as social systems and that their workings are explicable in principle. But then let us ask, what exactly do social systems consist of and how in practice do we set about explaining their workings? It admittedly follows from the position of social systems in the *scala naturae* that they are the most general and complex systems, both materially and formally: materially, because they contain within themselves all the previous stages of evolution; formally, because associations, institutions and societies are all their logical subclasses. It may seem natural, therefore, to see them as comprehending, in some kind of Comtean sense, the totality of human behaviour and to argue from this that the explanation of human behaviour, and therefore

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

human history, is to be derived from our knowledge of the laws by which the workings of social systems are governed. But this is just where Comte goes astray. It is perfectly fair to represent the study of sociology (or history), as Spencer likewise does, as 'the study of Evolution in its most complex form'.¹ But the temptation which has to be resisted, once we have agreed with Comte and Spencer that the science of social systems is in this sense the topmost branch of human knowledge, is then to talk as though the 'lower' disciplines concerned with the study of man are somehow derivable from, or subordinated to, or to be justified only in terms of, the 'higher'. This, at least, is what Comte himself seems sometimes (although, to be fair, not always) to have meant when he talked in such phrases as sociology 'completing our contemplation of reality' or the 'systematization of biological science which sociology alone can effect', and it is likewise what some of his successors seem to mean when they talk of a 'general sociological theory' of which the theories of the specialised social sciences are to be viewed as special cases. The error in this is to draw from the self-evident sense in which social systems comprehend all others the implication that the relationship of explanans to explanandum operates in the opposite direction to that in which it actually does. If there are lawlike generalisations (and why should there not be?) linking logically unconnected properties of social systems, their theoretical justification must be sought not from above but from below. They do not vindicate lawlike generalisations of other kinds, but call to be vindicated by them. If there is a science which stands to human history as pure to applied, it is not the science of social systems as such, but the science which Comte tried to bypass—psychology. Comte, in other words, should be stood on his head.

It may be that no one, not even the most committed disciple of Durkheim or Comte, wishes actually to question that the assertion that the subject-matter of sociology is social systems is not a denial that its subject-matter is still the behaviour of individual human beings. Indeed, it is often remarked that the so-called doctrine of 'methodological individualism' is in this sense trivially true. But if it is, then it is all the more remarkable that so many sociological writers should in practice have written as though it were not, or that they should at any rate have failed to draw the conclusion that sociology cannot be autonomous in the sense that Comte, and subsequently Durkheim, wished to maintain. For when we talk of the properties of social systems as the variables of the kind with which sociologists deal, we are still talking about individual beliefs

¹ Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (1873), p. 350.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

and actions; we are not attributing beliefs or actions to anyone or anything other than individual men and women; and even those who suggest that there are laws about social systems which are not derivable from laws about individuals cannot claim that a social system is an entity of which beliefs and actions are directly predicable. Whatever sociologists, anthropologists or historians may hold to be the constituents of social systems—whether institutions, or roles, or norms and sanctions, or actual social relations in the sense of Radcliffe-Brown, or forms of social relations in the sense of Lévi-Strauss—they are still dealing with the behaviour of persons towards each other. This is not to say that statements about a social system can always be translated into statements about designated individuals: a society's language, to take the example most commonly invoked, is more than the vocabulary and syntax of Messrs *A, B . . . Z*. But at the same time, it is only by individual persons that language is used, and only upon their uses of it that any assertion made about it by the observer can be based. Whatever view, therefore, is to be taken of the several disputes between 'individualists' and 'holists', whether the issue between them is the reducibility of concepts or the reducibility of laws, the sense in which social systems can be claimed to be more than the sum of their constituent members is not the same as that in which (at the level below) a statement about the behaviour or properties of an organism can be claimed to be more than a statement about the sum of its physiological parts. To explain the origins and workings of social systems is to explain the thoughts and actions of men. Such explanations, to be sure, will depend to a large degree on the properties of those social systems of which the individual is a member. Durkheim's dictum that '*les phénomènes sociaux prennent naissance non dans l'individu mais dans le groupe*' is entirely correct if it is understood to mean, in our contemporary jargon, that very little of social behaviour can satisfactorily be explained in terms of variables endogenous to the personality system itself. But once again, whether the properties of social systems are taken as the dependent or the independent variable, when we are talking of the properties of social systems (as distinct from the ecological properties of their environment) we are talking of what individual human beings may be shown to think, say and do.

Now there is nothing to prevent us, if we wish, from classifying the sciences in terms of independent instead of dependent variables. Once, indeed, we were so fortunate as to have general and well-confirmed causal laws, you could say that it would merely be a matter of looking at the same thing from the other end. From such a viewpoint, sociology becomes

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

the science of whatever is explained by variations in the properties of social systems, just as astrology is the science of whatever is explained by the conjunctions of the stars. But how useful a demarcation does this yield? It is possible that a researcher may stumble on the fact that what he thought was the cause of one thing is in fact the cause of another, or, more deliberately, that he may make an interesting discovery by looking about for facts that will fit his model rather than a model that will fit his facts: attempts by economists and demographers to fit stochastic process models to the statistics of income distribution or occupational mobility, furnish perfectly respectable examples. But this is not an adequate basis for demarcating the different social sciences. Such questions as 'what are the consequences of industrialisation?' or 'what will result from a change in the traditional rules of sexual morality?' are admittedly not meaningless: important decisions of social policy may depend on the answers to them. But they are questions to which no single and clearly defined answer is available precisely because so much is involved in accounting for the behaviour of the dependent variables. Once we recognise that all our talk about the properties of social systems is still talk about individual behaviour, it becomes apparent once again that to search for social laws in the sense of one-to-one correspondence between specified properties of social systems as causes and whatever other kinds of behaviour are observed to covary with them as effects is to turn the normal procedure of explaining behaviour back to front.

If, accordingly, we follow the more natural course of demarcating academic subjects in terms of the categories of dependent variables which they seek to subsume under some set of connected, disconfirmable laws, we shall want to say that sociology is the science of social systems in the sense that its laws explain how social systems behave. But this is still unsatisfactory. The 'behaviour of social systems' covers individual beliefs and actions of such different kinds that some further classification is immediately necessary. To account for any specified property of a social system requires that the relevant category of human behaviour and institutions is identified and linked to the antecedent conditions by reference to which its occurrence could in principle have been predicted. This requirement both explains and justifies the development of the specialised social sciences such as criminology, economics, demography, political science and the rest. It is not a coincidence that Smith, Malthus and Bentham, whom I cited as having made more important contributions to the scientific study of social institutions and behaviour than Comte, should be able readily to be assigned to specialised disciplines in a way

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14128-4 - Sociology in its Place and Other Essays

W. G. Runciman

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PLACE

that Comte cannot. It is natural to say that Smith contributed to economics, Malthus to demography and Bentham to jurisprudence because of the value of the attempts which they made to explain respectively markets, populations and the operations of the criminal law. We may label them all sociologists if we choose. But what will the label signify? The choice is effectively put by Hobhouse in an encyclopaedia article on 'Sociology' which he wrote in 1920: 'In a wider sense, sociology may be taken to cover the whole body of sociological specialisms. In a narrower sense it is itself a specialism, having as its object the discovery of the connecting links between other specialisms'.¹ But the first alternative, if it does not simply make sociology synonymous with the sciences of man in total, makes it then indistinguishable from anthropology and/or history; and the second alternative merely makes it an anthology drawn from the specialised social sciences, since the 'connecting links' are only discovered by a demonstration that among the independent variables needed to explain the subject-matter of one social science there are almost always included some of those which belong to one or more of the others. From either viewpoint, it is equally implausible—although almost universally done—to speak of sociology as though it were itself a distinctive social science co-ordinate with economics, demography, political science and all the other established 'specialisms'.

A defence of the autonomy of sociology on the grounds that it is the science of social systems is thus misconceived for the simple reason that there are not and cannot be laws of social systems as such. Sociology (together with history and anthropology) is a consumer of laws, not a producer of them. 'Sociological' laws can only be the laws of such specialised social sciences as may be defined in terms of one distinguishable category of collective behaviour which is shown to vary consistently in accordance with a specified range of necessary and sufficient conditions. To be sure, any individual action may be viewed from a number of different aspects. There are few items of human behaviour, even the simplest, which are exclusively economic or religious or political or what you will, and the explanation of any particular item of sequence of behaviour is likely, as I have just remarked, to invoke independent variables of several different kinds. But this is to say no more than that the social sciences are all, in the late Professor Pantin's term, 'unrestricted' sciences.² The economist or political scientist, in other words, is in the same situation as the geologist. He is not dealing with a closed and complete system of laws

¹ Reprinted in *Sociology and Philosophy* (ed. Ginsberg, 1966), p. 27.

² C. F. A. Pantin, *The Relations between the Sciences* (1968), ch. 1.