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978-0-521-27251-3 - A Treatise on Social Theory, Volume I: The Methodology of Social Theory

W. G. Runciman

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A treatise on social theory

VOLUME ONE

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VOLUME I: THE METHODOLOGY OF
SOCIAL THEORY

W. G. Runciman, F.B.A.

FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE



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- 2 Reportage in social theory
- 3 Explanation in social theory
- 4 Description in social theory
- 5 Evaluation in social theory

VOLUME II: SUBSTANTIVE SOCIAL THEORY

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VOLUME III: APPLIED SOCIAL THEORY

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VOLUME I

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Preface

The idea of this treatise was initially conceived in the summer of 1966. In the years between then and now, I have incurred more obligations than I could possibly hope to list to a great number of colleagues, pupils, correspondents, symposiasts, reviewers and friends. I must apologize collectively to them for not acknowledging individually the discussion and advice from which I have benefited at their hands. But I am fully aware how much I owe to all of them for it.

I must apologize also to readers who may be familiar with what I have written on these matters already, since on some topics I repeat without qualification, while on others I flatly contradict, arguments which I have set out in print elsewhere. I can only ask such readers to accept that I am now putting forward as systematically as I am able to do views of which I have come to be sufficiently persuaded that except on points of detail I am unlikely to revise them again. This treatise is not going to be the full and definitive treatment of its subject which in 1966 I dreamed that I might one day be able to achieve. But I have come to the reluctant conclusion that it would not be significantly improved if I were to delay the start of its publication yet further. My hope is that Volume II will be completed by 1985 and Volume III by 1990. But each volume can, in any case, be read independently of the one or two still to follow.

The delay since 1966 is due in large part to my having decided to combine my academic career with a career in business. I wish that I could feel entitled, like Namier in his Preface to *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, to quote Gibbon's dictum that 'the Captain of Hampshire Grenadiers has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire'. But I am in any case aware that the chairmen of companies are not always wiser than university professors. I have learned much about the workings of social institutions from my experience of what is misleadingly called the 'real' world. But the extent to which I am a better sociologist for being at the same time a practising capitalist should be left to my readers to judge rather than to me.

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My particular gratitude is due to Jon Elster, Alan Ryan and John Torrance for comments on the preliminary version of this volume which have saved me from many errors and infelicities; to Bernard Williams, who very kindly read two separate versions and whose criticisms were of exceptional value; to Patricia Williams, whose editorial counsel and patience have been of the greatest help throughout; to the Council of Trinity College, Cambridge for the award of a Fellowship under Title B and the facilities for research which go with it; to Lesley Flaherty, who has typed and retyped successive drafts with unfailing cheerfulness; and above all to my wife, to whom the work as a whole is dedicated in the knowledge that without her understanding and support I could never have undertaken it at all.

Trinity College, Cambridge
December 1981

W.G.R.