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# Sociological explanation as translation

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*For my parents*

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## Preface

The person who attempts to deal with the problem of the explanation of human action must be possessed of more gall than sense, for he must realize that of the many writers who have grappled with it, few have done very well. The origins of the problem must be traced to Hobbes, whose whole project hinged on the idea that a new kind of explanation or means of understanding motions had been revealed by Galileo and could be applied to man's "motions." Hobbes was followed and refined by Locke and Hume and applied to the history of society by Comte, Mill, and Marx. Merely recounting such names shows why these problems cannot be ignored: The writings of these figures on derivative problems of politics constitute the significant political, economic, and social ideas of our time. Because of this, their foundational concerns with the philosophical problems of the understanding of human action remain our problems today.

Curiously, the history of these problems is not widely understood in the disciplines in which social explanations are actually offered, and so scarcely a year passes without the footsteps of Hobbes or of his detractors of earlier centuries being retraced, with the result that a new volume on "theory construction" or "the language of sociology" or "new rules of sociological method" takes its place on an already crowded shelf. If there is any merit to the present work, it is that it is a departure not from the problems of Hobbes and his successors but from the character of their writings. No new explanatory program is offered here. My approach has been to accept the existence and intellectual substance of sociology and to try to show why the substantive problems of concern to sociology are genuine problems and why their solutions are, at least in part, genuine solutions.

I have tried to present fundamental issues in an accessible form by dealing with well-known examples. The analysis of these examples can be applied analogically to other examples of sociological explanation. But I leave these further applications to the reader. The philosophical

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*Preface*

subtleties of the argument have been made as unobtrusive as possible. The philosophical reader should, however, have no difficulty in relating the argument to ongoing issues in the philosophy of social science. At the technical philosophical level, I have simplified by taking Winch for usufruct: The same points may be stated without reference to his emphasis on “rule following.” Apart from this emphasis, the argument may be seen to have an affinity to that of Hilary Putnam’s *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (1978). My treatment of several of these philosophical issues in “Translating Ritual Beliefs” (1979), which does not rely on the concept of rule following, is more closely comparable to Putnam’s approach than to Winch’s.

Because I do not attempt, in this study, to evaluate the claims of the various sociologies and sociological methods, some readers will reasonably wish to know how I do evaluate them. I have given a critique of both the “causal modeling” and Zetterbergian approaches to “theory construction” in “Getting Clear about the Sign-Rule” (1974). Different critical points about standard quantitative sociologies are made in “Blau’s Theory of Differentiation: Is It Explanatory?” (1977), in “Chance and Eminence in Science” (1979, with Daryl Chubin), and in the closing pages of “The Process of Criticism in Interpretive Sociology and History” (1978, with David Carr). This last article is primarily devoted to a critique of the phenomenological approach to action explanation. In “The Critique of Positivist Sociology in Leo Strauss and Jürgen Habermas” (1977, with Regis Factor), I deal with Habermas’s critique of the concept of language games as insufficiently transcendental. Symbolic anthropology is discussed in “Translating Ritual Beliefs.” For the reader interested in an exhaustive critique of symbolic interactionism and sociological phenomenology from a Wittgensteinian point of view, I recommend David Rubinstein’s book on the subject, *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation* (forthcoming).

A number of people deserve thanks. Ken Benson and Bill Wilcox provided useful criticisms (and sometimes even more useful expressions of complete incomprehension). My wife, Summer, performed many essential services, great and small. The Rose Monograph Committee and especially its chairman, Robin Williams, showed an important kind of academic integrity in the way they handled a work that they knew would be controversial.

*Stephen Turner*