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0521398339 - The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences

Edited by Quentin Skinner

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1 Introduction:

the return of Grand Theory

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I

Writing almost exactly twenty-five years ago about the state of the human sciences in the English-speaking world, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills isolated and castigated two major theoretical traditions which he saw as inimical to the effective development of what he described, in the title of his book, as *The Sociological Imagination*.¹ The first was the tendency – one that he associated in particular with the philosophies of Comte and Marx, Spencer and Weber – to manipulate the evidence of history in such a way as to manufacture ‘a trans-historical strait-jacket’ (Wright Mills 1959: 22). But the other and even larger impediment to the progress of the human sciences he labelled Grand Theory, by which he meant the belief that the primary goal of the social disciplines should be that of seeking to construct ‘a systematic theory of “the nature of man and society”’ (ibid.: 23).

Wright Mills was unusual among sociologists of his generation in attacking the pretensions of Grand Theory in the name of imagination rather than science.² But his hostility towards the construction of abstract and normative theories of human nature and conduct was an attitude he shared with most of the leading practitioners not merely of sociology but of all the human sciences in the English-speaking world at that time. Many of the same suspicions were echoed, for example, by students of history. It is symptomatic that, at the time of which I am speaking, the leading English historian was widely held to be Sir Lewis Namier. For Namier was not merely at his happiest when chronicling the detailed manoeuvres of individual political actors at the centres of political power; he was also a sarcastic critic of the belief that any general social theories (or flapdoodle, as he preferred to call them) could possibly be relevant to the explanation of political behaviour or the processes of social change (Namier 1930: 147; Namier 1955: 3–4).

We even encounter a similar scepticism among moral and political theorists of the same generation, a scepticism expressed in the form of two related claims that enjoyed widespread support. One was that, to cite a notorious title of Daniel Bell’s, the ‘end of

¹ Wright Mills 1959. As well as attacking these theoretical orientations, Wright Mills singled out a third tendency he deplored, the tendency of sociological investigations to degenerate into the study of ‘a series of rather unrelated and often insignificant facts’ (ibid.: 23).

² This had the valuable effect of putting him at odds with the ‘end-of-ideology’ theorists, of whom he was one of the earliest critics.

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ideology' had been reached (Bell 1960). The attempt to formulate general social or political philosophies thus came to be treated as little better than a confused and old-fashioned failure to keep up with the scientific times. Connected with this was the positive injunction to abandon the study of the grand philosophical systems of the past, with their unsatisfactory mixture of descriptive and evaluative elements, in order to get on with the truly scientific and purportedly value-neutral task of constructing what came to be called 'empirical theories' of social behaviour and development.³ The effect of all this was to make it appear that two millennia of philosophising about the social world had suddenly come to an end.⁴

This drive towards a science of politics and society was in turn encouraged by the view then prevailing as to the proper relationship between philosophy and the other cultural disciplines. A philosopher was taken to be someone whose basic concern is to explicate general concepts by way of analysing the meanings of the terms used to express them. One implication of this commitment was that it must simply be a mistake to suppose that the true business of moral, social and political philosophy can ever be to provide us with reasoned defences of particular ideals or practices. To cite two other characteristic works of the fifties, the aim was held to be that of studying not morality itself but merely (in R. M. Hare's title) the 'language of morals'; not politics itself but merely (in T. D. Weldon's title) the 'vocabulary of politics' (Hare 1952; Weldon 1953). With the philosophers themselves proclaiming that there was nothing systematic for them to tell us about the substantive moral and political issues of the day, the burgeoning of a purely empirical science of society seemed assured.

Further support for such scientific aspirations came from some of the leading philosophical doctrines, even dogmas, of the same period. Within the philosophy of science, a positivist account of what constitutes an explanation largely held sway. To explain a puzzling set of facts was taken to be a matter of showing that their occurrence can be deduced and hence predicted from a known natural or at least statistical law.⁵ The prestige of this analysis not only served to direct social scientists to look for regularities as the

³ For a classic instance of this approach, especially as applied to the politics of democratic states, see Lipset 1960. For a classic critique, see Taylor 1967: 25–57.

⁴ See Laslett 1956: vii: 'For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead.'

⁵ For one of the most influential statements see Hempel 1965: 245–95 and for the claim that this model applies equally to historical explanations cf. *ibid.*: 231–43.

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only acceptable basis for explaining social phenomena. It also required them to believe that there was no reason in principle why human actions should not be viewed and explained in just the same way as natural events.⁶ The result was that ‘man as a subject for science’ – to cite the title of a well-known essay by A. J. Ayer – came to seem not just a possible but the only respectable goal for the social disciplines (Ayer 1967: 6–24).

Finally, the idea of a science of society gained specific direction as well as general encouragement from the widespread endorsement of what Barry Barnes describes (in Chapter 5 of this book) as ‘rationalist’ assumptions about the practice of science itself. Among philosophers of science who adopted a generally ‘rationalist’ stance, Karl Popper and his numerous disciples probably exercised the most powerful influence upon the conduct of the social disciplines. Popper’s most important contribution was to put into currency a particular view of what can properly be said to count as a scientifically respectable belief. A belief is rationally grounded, Popper maintained, and hence scientifically respectable, if and only if it has been submitted to a ‘crucial experiment’ designed to falsify it, and has succeeded in passing that test. If a statement – or a body of statements in a theory – fails the test of falsifiability, or proves incapable of submitting to it, we have a clear indication that nonsense is being talked (Popper 1959: 78–92). With this suggestion, the social disciplines found themselves provided with a ready and easy way of separating purportedly factual from merely normative or metaphysical assertions, and thereby placing themselves on the straight and narrow path towards becoming genuine sciences. Popper himself urged these distinctions with passionate conviction throughout his polemic on the ‘open society and its enemies’: piecemeal empirical research in the human sciences was alone commended, while Marxism, psychoanalysis, and all forms of Utopian social philosophy were together consigned to the dustbin of history (Popper 1945: II, 212–80).

Times have certainly changed. During the past generation, Utopian social philosophies have once again been practised as well as preached; Marxism has revived and flourished in an almost bewildering variety of forms; psychoanalysis has gained a new theoretical orientation with the work of Lacan and his followers; Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt School have continued to reflect on the parallels between the theories of Marx and

⁶ For a typical statement of this view see Brodbeck 1968: 58–78.

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Freud; the Women's Movement has added a whole range of previously neglected insights and arguments; and amidst all this turmoil the empiricist and positivist citadels of English-speaking social philosophy have been threatened and undermined by successive waves of hermeneuticists, structuralists, post-empiricists, deconstructionists and other invading hordes.

By now, with the dust of battle subsiding, it seems possible to take stock, and this is what we have tried to do in this book. We have focused on a number of individual thinkers who have played, we believe, a role of exceptional importance in helping to bring about these changes of theoretical allegiance. But at the same time we have tried to place them in a wider intellectual context, our aim being to illuminate the more general character of the upheavals and transformations that have served to restructure the human sciences over the past quarter of a century.⁷

II

Among these general transformations, perhaps the most significant has been the widespread reaction against the assumption that the natural sciences offer an adequate or even a relevant model for the practice of the social disciplines. The clearest reflection of this growing doubt has been the revival of the suggestion that the explanation of human behaviour and the explanation of natural events are logically distinct undertakings, and thus that the positivist contention that all successful explanations must conform to the same deductive model must be fundamentally misconceived. From many different directions the cry has instead gone up for the development of a hermeneutic approach to the human sciences, an approach that will do justice to the claim that the explanation of human action must always include – and perhaps even take the form of – an attempt to recover and interpret the meanings of social actions from the point of view of the agents performing them.

Some recent social theorists have sought to reconcile these two traditions – very much in the spirit of Max Weber – by arguing that a satisfactory theory of social explanation must take account of both the meanings and the causes of social phenomena.⁸ But others

⁷ For the idea of the 'restructuring' of social and political theory, see Bernstein 1976.

⁸ Habermas upholds this position against Gadamer on the one hand and the positivists on the other in Habermas 1971a: 301–17. Among English social theorists, Runciman has commended Weber for adopting this position in Runciman 1972 and explored its implications himself in Runciman 1983.

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have rejected the possibility of such an accommodation, reverting instead to the far more radical suggestion – the suggestion of such earlier writers as Dilthey and Collingwood – that we should view the task of the historian and the sociologist in purely interpretative terms.⁹ One important influence on these developments has been exercised by Wittgenstein's later philosophy, with its anti-positivist insistence that the meaning of an utterance is a matter of its use, and thus that the understanding of any meaningful episode – whether an action or an utterance – always involves us in placing it within its appropriate 'form of life'.¹⁰ Of even more direct relevance, however, to the practice of the human sciences has been the adoption of a similar viewpoint by Hans-Georg Gadamer, the subject of the second chapter in this book. Drawing in part on Dilthey, but above all on Heidegger, Gadamer has argued in his major treatise, *Truth and Method*, that the one appropriate model to invoke in seeking to understand a social action is that of interpreting a text: a model in which we are not in the least concerned with the search for causes or the framing of laws, but entirely with the circular process of seeking to understand a whole in terms of its parts, and its parts in terms of the contribution they make to the meaning of the whole (Gadamer 1975a).

At the same time, however, Gadamer has injected a new element of scepticism into this long-standing debate. By emphasising the limitations of our own horizons, the prejudices and preconceptions we inevitably bring to bear upon the task of understanding another form of life, Gadamer has cast doubt on whether we can ever hope to reach the traditional goal of interpretation, that of grasping an alien action, utterance or text 'objectively' in its own terms. The most we can ever hope for, he concludes, is a 'fusion of horizons', a partial rapprochement between our present world, from which we can never hope to detach ourselves, and the different world we are seeking to appraise (Gadamer 1975a: 267–74).

From such doubts it has proved a short step to the anarchistic conclusion that we ought not to think of interpretation as a method of attaining truths at all, but ought rather – in the words of Paul Feyerabend's title – to be 'against method' (Feyerabend 1975).

⁹ For the renewal of interest in these writers, see for example Gadamer 1975a: 153–234 (on Dilthey); Skinner 1969 and Dunn 1980: 2–4 (on Collingwood). For an important restatement of a similar case see Taylor 1971.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein 1958: esp. 8–12. For the centrality of this concept in Wittgenstein's later philosophy see Cavell 1976: 44–72. For its application to the social sciences see Winch 1958.

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Feyerabend has mainly applied this insight to scientific theories, arguing that we ought to remain as unconstrained and imaginative as possible in dreaming up alternatives to existing bodies of alleged knowledge.¹¹ Even more unsettling, however, has been the growing refusal, even in the case of literary interpretation, to treat the recovery of an intended meaning as any part of the interpreter's task. Here the leading iconoclast has been Jacques Derrida, the subject of the third chapter in this book. Derrida is fond of pointing to examples in which, due to the presence of some semantic ambiguity, together with the absence of any context that tells us how to 'take' what has been said, the result is an utterance we cannot hope to interpret with any certainty at all. He then generalises this insight to entire texts and oeuvres, insisting that we never have enough authority to privilege any one interpretation over another. The hermeneutic enterprise, he concludes, is actually a mistake: what is needed instead is what he calls (in the title of one of his most recent books) 'dissemination', the activity of illustrating with more and more examples the ultimate illegibility of texts (Derrida 1981a).

III

Along with these proliferating philosophical doubts about the possibility of modelling the social disciplines on a traditional image of the natural sciences, a series of moral objections have been raised of recent years against the positivist ambition to construct a science of society. One of the first victims of this development proved to be the 'end-of-ideology' argument. MacIntyre and others quickly pointed out that the thesis itself amounted to little more than an ideological reading of consensus politics, one in which silence was (recklessly, as it turned out) taken for agreement (MacIntyre 1971: 3–11). Habermas subsequently went on to emphasise a deeper level of moral bankruptcy encouraged by this vision of political life. As he argued in *Legitimation Crisis*, to claim that politics is a purely technological affair, and thus that ideology must have come to an end, has the effect of grounding the stability and even the legitimacy of the state on its capacity to maintain a high level of technological success, above all by delivering a sustained rate of economic growth.

¹¹ 'There is only *one* principle that can be defended under *all* circumstances and in *all* stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*' (Feyerabend 1975: 28). Cf. also Feyerabend 1981 for the use of historical case-studies to exemplify the merits of an anarchistic approach.

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The danger is obvious: in times of economic recession, such states will be unable to call on any wider or more traditional loyalties on the part of their citizens, with the result that economic difficulties will readily and dangerously mutate into crises of legitimacy (Habermas 1975: 33–94). It is a striking fact that, although Habermas presents this diagnosis from a Marxist perspective, a number of political writers from the so-called New Right have lately developed a remarkably similar attack on the moral limitations of *laissez-faire* capitalism, defending a form of conservatism founded not on free markets and the minimalist state, but rather on an almost Hegelian sense that the values of community, loyalty and deference must be prized and cultivated above all.¹²

Even more vociferous doubts about the normative presuppositions of positivism have been voiced of recent years by the psychologists. To perceive all human behaviour in lawlike, causal terms – as R. D. Laing and his associates have especially protested – presupposes that the question to ask about abnormal behaviour must always be what malfunction is prompting it. But this is to overlook the possibility that the behaviour in question may be strategic, a way of trying to cope with the world. And this oversight, Laing has argued, has the effect of reducing the agents involved to objects of manipulation when they deserve to be treated as subjects of consciousness.¹³

Behind this move towards an existential psychology can be discerned the authority of Sartre, to whom Laing and his followers owe an evident intellectual debt. Among more recent theorists, however, undoubtedly the most influential of those who have come to think in these terms has been Michel Foucault, the subject of the fourth chapter in this book. For the past two decades – before his tragically early death in 1984 – Foucault devoted himself to compiling historical case-studies about the treatment of such issues as madness, sexuality and criminality in our society, his aim being to demonstrate that claims to understand such phenomena have increasingly become associated with techniques of social control. As a philosopher, Foucault's central concern came to be that of forging a link between such claims to knowledge and the exercise of coercive power. As a moralist, his aim became that of urging us to break out of the prison we have increasingly built around ourselves in the

¹² For a representative statement of this commitment by an English commentator, see Scruton 1980. For an American example, see Will 1984.

¹³ See Laing 1960; for Laing on Sartre see *ibid.*: 94n, 95–6.

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name of scientific expertise. His was an almost romantic protest – one with a long pedigree among critics of industrial capitalism – against the routines and disciplines of our society, a protest which he combined with a call to resist and destroy the so-called human sciences in the name of our own humanity.

These various lines of attack on the very idea of a social science have in part derived, and have drawn great strength, from increasing doubts as to whether the sciences themselves are truly capable of living up to their own image as paradigms of the rational pursuit of knowledge. Here the most influential scepticism has been expressed by Thomas Kuhn, whose work is discussed in Chapter 5 of this book. Citing extensive evidence from the history of science, Kuhn has argued in his classic study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that scientific communities rarely if ever espouse a Popperian ideal of seeking counter-examples to existing hypotheses and accepting as knowledge only such propositions as survive such tests. Normal science, as Kuhn calls it, instead proceeds by seeking confirmation of existing theories, theories whose authority is generally invoked to dispose of awkward counter-examples rather than being abandoned in the light of them. Whereas Popper had sought to question a Humean analysis of rational belief, Kuhn's analysis reinstates it.¹⁴ To this account Kuhn adds that, if we wish to explain the acceptance or rejection of particular scientific hypotheses, what we need to invoke are the established customs of science as a profession, not merely the purportedly rational methods of disinterested scientists. In a fascinating parallel with Foucault's thought, the practice of science is thus depicted as a means of controlling what is permitted to count as knowledge.

Kuhn's most basic contention is that the reason why the sciences do not and cannot emulate a Popperian account of their practice is that our access to the facts in the light of which we test our beliefs is always filtered by what Kuhn has called our existing 'paradigms' or frameworks of understanding (Kuhn 1970: 43–51). To put the point more starkly, there *are* no facts independent of our theories about them, and in consequence no one way of viewing, classifying and explaining the world that all rational persons are obliged to accept. Rival theories can of course be compared, but not against an objective scale: in the end they are simply incommensurable, with the result that their exponents may be said (in Kuhn's Idealist-

¹⁴ This contrast between Popper and Kuhn is well brought out in Mortimore and Maund 1976: 11–33.

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sounding metaphor) to be living and working in different worlds (Kuhn 1970: 134–5).

Kuhn's attack on standard notions of scientific rationality bears some resemblance to Quine's celebrated onslaught on what he calls the empiricist dogma of supposing there to be a categorical distinction between concepts and facts (Quine 1953: 20–46). It is also somewhat reminiscent of Wittgenstein's insistence that all our attempts to understand what we call the facts will always be relative to the framework of a particular form of life. Where all these influences have flowed together, as they have for example in Richard Rorty's remarkable book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the outcome has been nothing less than a disposition to question the place of philosophy as well as the sciences within our culture. If our access to reality is inevitably conditioned by local beliefs about what is to count as knowledge, then the traditional claim of the sciences to be finding out more and more about the world as it really is begins to look questionable, or at least unduly simplified. Moreover, if there is no canonical grid of concepts in terms of which the world is best divided up and classified, then the traditional role of philosophy as the discipline that analyses such concepts is also thrown into doubt.¹⁵ Epistemology, conceived in Kantian terms as the study of what can be known with certainty, begins to seem an impossibility; instead we appear to be threatened with the spectre of epistemological relativism.¹⁶

Among those who have argued in this way, the study of history has increasingly proved to be a fertile source of inspiration and evidence. Foucault's writings constantly seek to confront our sense of how the world needs to be seen with the very different record of how it has in fact been seen at different times. Kuhn similarly presents himself as an historian, seeking to investigate the actual behaviour of scientific communities in such a way as to undermine, by reference to the historical record, some of the *a priori* commitments of contemporary philosophers of science. Partly in consequence of these developments, a number of historians as well as ethnographers have in turn become quite explicit in presenting their own studies as further ammunition in the fight against naive realism and associated normative views about human nature and rationality. Among his-

¹⁵ Rorty 1979: esp. 315–56. For a discussion, see Skinner 1981.

¹⁶ Some argue that this spectre has in fact materialised, and that we have no reason to be alarmed by it. See Rorty 1979 for a cautious statement; Barnes and Bloor 1982: 21–47 for a less cautious one.