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0521678587 - A Realist Philosophy of Social Science: Explanation and Understanding

Peter T. Manicas

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A Realist Philosophy of Social Science

This introduction to the philosophy of social science provides an original conception of the task and nature of social inquiry. Peter Manicas discusses the role of causality seen in the physical sciences and offers a reassessment of the problem of explanation from a realist perspective. He argues that the fundamental goal of theory in both the natural and social sciences is not, contrary to widespread opinion, prediction and control, or the explanation of events (including behavior). Instead, theory aims to provide an understanding of the processes which, together, produce the contingent outcomes of experience. Offering a host of concrete illustrations and examples of critical ideas and issues, this accessible book will be of interest to students of the philosophy of social science, and social scientists from a range of disciplines.

PETER T. MANICAS is Director of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521678582

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First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-86140-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-86140-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-67858-2 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-67858-7 paperback

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To my wife

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Acknowledgements

The ideas in this volume have been germinating for some time. In that time, I have accrued many debts. My education in the social sciences began perhaps with my PhD mentor at Buffalo, Marvin Farber, who, along with Bill Parry, started me on the path I pursue in this book. Farber also let me write a dissertation in the Philosophy Department which would not have been possible at most universities. My instruction in history and the social sciences was advanced when I became Director of the Program in Contemporary Civilization at Queens, a genuinely interdisciplinary program required of all students. While Farber and Parry had convinced me that an understanding of social science was essential – we read Dewey's *Logic* along with Schütz and standard works in the philosophy of science – Rom Harré and Paul Secord, authors of the important (if for me, mis-titled) volume, *The Explanation of Social Behavior* (1973) were critical in disabusing me of my lingering and unacknowledged logical empiricism. Paul and I team-taught when we were both members of the Queens College faculty, but I remember well my failure to see the connection between the main messages of their book and what I had brought from Buffalo. Some of these ideas were tried out at Queens College at the Monday lunch group, a remarkable assembly of social scientists – too many to list here – who met regularly, lunched, heard papers and had marvelous discussions. I also regularly team-taught with many of this group in an undergraduate social science honors course – a luxury of inefficiency not much tolerated these days. The furious debates between the members of that floating group – Tito Gerassi, Ray Franklin, Carl Riskin, Mike Harrington, Bill Tabb, Paul Avrich, Mike Wreszin, Saul Resnick, Mike Brown, Burton Zweibach and Lenny Markowitz to name only a few – were remarkable learning experiences, even if we sometimes terrified the undergraduates with our passion. The *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, initiated by Harré and Secord, but edited with style and insight for the past twenty years by Charles Smith, not only provided opportunity for me to test some of these ideas but was where I was introduced to the work of Roy Bhaskar. His presence, along with that of Rom

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Harré, was large in my *History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, my first major attempt to set out what was amiss in our understanding of the social sciences.

I have been lucky also to have held two posts at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. After taking an early retirement at Queens, I became a member of the Sociology Department and Director of Interdisciplinary Studies at Hawai'i. My two long-standing colleagues in that wonderful unit, Jaishree Odin and Emanuel Drechsel, both powerful interdisciplinary thinkers, have been a constant source of knowledge and support. Prior to that I had taught off and on in the Department of Political Science, where I picked up some further debts, but especially to my good friend Manfred Henningsen. Each of these roles has been a delight. They certainly enabled me to continue my interdisciplinary interests. My large lecture section in sociology 100 was meant to enlarge the idea of introductory social science. While everyone talks about cultivating "the sociological imagination," it is hard to see how one can do this with the awful standard disciplinary textbooks and multiple choice exams. Teaching the sequence of required courses in sociological theory to both graduates and undergraduates forced me to re-think ideas that once seemed clear to me. I am indebted also to my close colleague and friend in the Sociology Department, Herb Barringer.

Most of my debts remain unacknowledged, but I must mention, at least, those who have read and made suggestions on the present work. In addition to some of those already mentioned, these include: Sam Pooley, Gregory Maskarinec and Manfred Steger.