1 Introduction

Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating

This book is an introduction to approaches and methodologies in the social sciences. 'Approaches' is a general term, wider than theory or methodology. It includes epistemology or questions about the theory of knowledge; the purposes of research, whether understanding, explanation or normative evaluation; and the 'meta-theories' within which particular theories are located. It takes in basic assumptions about human behaviour; whether the unit of analysis is the individual or the social group; and the role of ideas and interests. The first part of the book outlines some of these approaches, their development and the key issues they address. It is, in the spirit of the project as a whole, pluralistic, and readers should not expect the chapters to build into a single picture. Rather, they present different research traditions and orientations, some of which overlap while others are more starkly opposed.

The second part moves into questions of methodology, of how we turn a research problem into a workable design and of the basic choices to be made about methods. It does not go into detail on methods themselves; for this, students must turn to the numerous manuals available. The chapters should, however, help them to read and understand research based on different methodologies as well as help to guide their own choices. Readers will not find a road map leading step-by-step to their final goal. Instead, we present a map of the terrain over which they must travel, noting the main landmarks and turning points on their way. The various contributions follow different styles, reflecting individual and national preferences but also the ways in which the various approaches have developed, sometimes in interaction with each other. Authors present different mixes of rules and illustrations, reviews of sophisticated methodological debates and concrete 'how-to' suggestions in the various steps of a research design and its implementation.

Big questions

A number of big questions run through the whole collection. One is the fundamental question of epistemology, of what we know and how we know it. This is one of the oldest issues in philosophy and can never be resolved to the satisfaction of all. Fortunately, we can make progress without always having to return to these foundational issues; but nonetheless, it is important to be clear just which epistemological assumptions we are making in our research. Social scientists work much of the time with concepts, which are more or less abstract representations of the social world they are studying. Indeed, without basic notions such as class, state and society it is difficult to see how we could get anywhere; but when we use these concepts in radically different ways, common knowledge and even informed disagreement become impossible.

Another important issue is that of the units of analysis. One tradition in the social sciences, that of individualism, holds that only individuals really exist (ontological individualism) or that only individuals can act and, therefore, social science is the study of what individuals do (methodological individualism). Most versions of rational choice theory start from the individual and explain broader processes as the aggregation of individual acts. Other approaches, however, use larger units of analysis, including collectivities and institutions such as classes, ethnic groups or states. Related to this is the issue of the level of analysis: whether we are interested only in micro-level behaviour and infer broader social processes and change (the macro level) from that, or whether we can reason at the level of social aggregates. For example, international relations scholars may be interested in the behaviour of individual states, or may think of the pattern of international relations as composing a system with its own logic; critics of the 'realist' approach insist that the states themselves are not unitary actors. Whereas unit of analysis is a choice of empirical items to study, level of analysis is concerned with theory and the level at which explanations are postulated to work. The authors in this book take different views on this matter and the micro–macro link, and it is important that the reader note this.

A recurrent debate in social science concerns theories of action: why people do as they do. Some social scientists take an individualist perspective, adding the assumption that individuals are motivated by self-interest and will do what maximizes their own benefits – the logic of consequentialism. This supposition underlies most rational choice theory, although some proponents of

rational choice stretch the idea of self-interest to include altruistic behaviour. Critics see this assumption as untenable and, when stretched to include all behaviour, tautological. An alternative explanation for behaviour is that it is the product of learned norms and socialization. Institutions play a role here, both in setting the incentives for rational choice and for providing the socialization mechanisms. In addition, people may act based on what they consider to be right according to ideology or ethical criteria. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the role of ideas as opposed to interests in social and political life; and in the way that perceptions of interests are conditioned by ideas.

The purposes of social science research are often contested. For some, the aim is explanation of social behaviour, on the assumption that it has causes that are knowable and measurable. Few people now think that social science works like Newtonian mechanics, with fixed mechanisms that are predictable. Some social scientists, however, do aim to approximate this; if they do not always succeed, it is because there is missing information which, in principle, could be supplied. Other scholars prefer the analogy of biology, with social behaviour evolving over time in response to learning and adaptation. Some of the work in historical institutionalism is informed by this idea. Yet some social scientists disclaim the idea of explanation and causation altogether, seeking rather to understand the motivations and calculations of actors who are not pre-determined in their behaviour. This breaks altogether with the natural science analogy and is closer to the approach and methodology of historians. Expressed in modern social science as the choice between agency and structural explanations, this dilemma corresponds in many ways to the old philosophical debate as to how far human beings are possessed of free will.

There is a persistent division in the social sciences between those who prefer to break their material up into variables and those who prefer dealing with whole cases. In our experience, there are few causes of greater confusion among graduate social scientists, many of whom insist on speaking in the language of variables while working with whole cases, or occasionally vice versa. The difference will be evident in the chapters to follow, with some authors insisting on a variable-based approach and others favouring holistic methods. Donatella della Porta addresses the argument more explicitly. Our view is that there is not one 'right' way to do analysis. Both variable-driven and case-driven research are the products of prior conceptualization and theorization, since neither cases nor variables exist as objects. If we are interested in parsimonious explanations and generalization as to what causes what, then it is

useful to isolate variables and examine their effects across cases. If we are interested in context and in the complexity of outcomes, then whole cases may yield more insight. So one approach may explain part of the outcome in a large number of cases, while another may explain most of the outcome in a small number of cases.

Methods, too, divide social scientists. In a very general sense, we can talk of a distinction between hard methods (usually based on a positivist epistemology and a belief in the reality of social concepts) and soft methods (relying more on interpretation). Yet matters are in practice a great deal more complicated, with different forms of information being suitable for different forms of analysis. There is scope for combining methods through triangulation, but, in order to do this, we need to be clear of the assumptions that underlie each and to ensure that they are not incompatible.

Most sciences have an agreed-upon set of concepts and a shared vocabulary so that, even where there is no agreement on substance, at least we know what the disagreement is about. In the social sciences, concepts are often unclear or contested – think of the different meanings of globalization, capitalism or Europeanization. Concepts are contested when people use them in different ways. They are 'essentially contested' when there is no possibility of common meaning because they are based on different epistemological premises or underpin radically different world-views. Even where concepts are not consciously contested, there is often no shared vocabulary, and the same word may be used differently in different disciplines or even within the same discipline. This is confusing enough where words have quite distinct meanings. It is even more confusing where meanings only partially agree and overlap. Readers should be alert to this problem, and we have provided a glossary of the meanings of some key terms at the end of the book.

Finally, there is the issue of norms and values in social sciences. One school of thought seeks rigorously value-free social science, again on the natural science model. Norms might be a subject for study in themselves, insofar as they can be operationalized and measured; but the social scientist should set his or her own values aside. Others disagree, arguing that many concepts and much of our language has a normative content – think of terms like peace, democracy or legitimacy – and cannot be understood without it. Some go further and argue that, until the twentieth century, the social sciences were concerned with the conditions for improving the human lot and that this, rather than explanation and prediction, is what the human sciences are good at, and that they should return to it.

National traditions and cross-national influences

Social sciences (as opposed to philosophy) emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alongside the nation-state. They often remained bound by national assumptions and experiences; even political and social data tend to come in national sets. The result is a certain 'methodological nationalism', which takes two forms. One is a tendency to generalize from one's own country, often presented as the harbinger of modernity and the model for the future. The other is the myth of exceptionalism, according to which one's own country is the exception to the general rules of development and thus deserving of particular interest. For example, in most countries there exists a school of thought to the effect that the particular country is exceptional in never having had a real 'bourgeois revolution'. Paradoxically, one thing that nearly all countries do have in common is the notion that they are exceptional.

Speaking of national traditions risks reifying them and suggesting a uniformity that does not exist, yet certain ideas continue to be stressed in particular countries, as do specific approaches. For example, the concept of the state has a meaning in France and Germany that is difficult to convey in the United States or the United Kingdom. By contrast, American scholars, while downplaying the concept of the state in domestic politics, often give it supreme importance in international relations. French social science traditionally tends to an abstraction that contrasts with the empiricism of the English-speaking world. As emerging disciplines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political science and sociology were linked in some countries to the older disciplines of history and law and these legacies are still visible. In many countries, international relations emerged as a discipline separate from comparative politics. The division between political science and sociology is sharper in the United Kingdom and the United States than in France or Italy. Sometimes these contrasts reflect differences in the political and social realities of the countries concerned. France has traditionally had a strong state. American politics has revolved around interest-group pluralism within a rather narrowly defined value system (at least until the revival of the religious cleavage). Yet the difference in intellectual emphasis does not always reflect an underlying social reality, as opposed to different ways of thinking about politics and society. There is thus great value in taking the concepts and ideas from one country and seeking to apply them comparatively, and more generally in seeking concepts that travel, both as an aid to comparative research and as an antidote to methodological nationalism.

There had always been an international market in ideas, peaking at times such as the Renaissance or the eighteenth-century Enlightenment; but in the twentieth century, this intensified greatly. The existence of a common language, successively Latin, French and English, encourages this, but itself may shape the ideas and their reception. For our purposes, two arenas are important: the market of ideas within Europe, and transatlantic trade as the United States has ascended to a dominant position within the social science research world. For example, the 'behavioural revolution' in the 1960s was American in origin but powerfully affected European thinking from the 1970s onwards, emphasizing universalism, quantification and rigour. Rational choice theory, so influential from the 1980s, was not an American monopoly but was strongest there and was powerfully aided by the strength of US social science in the global market. Other ideas have more complex histories. Organizational analysis was imported from the United States in the 1950s by Michel Crozier and others, who transformed it into a particularly French form of science, the 'sociology of organizations'. This in turn was taken up by British scholars and brought back into the English-speaking world. Here it encountered the 'new institutionalism', which had been working with similar ideas, starting from a different basis, as a reaction to behaviourism and rational choice. European sociology was influenced by American approaches, but also developed and then diffused new ideas of its own. Among others, French sociologist Alain Touraine was influenced by Parsonian functionalism when developing his theory of society, and European ethno-methodologists by Erwin Goffman. In all these fields, ideas developed by European scholars travelled to the other side of the Atlantic, with particularly strong impacts on theorization and research on such issues as power (Foucault), communication (Habermas) and culture (Bourdieu).

There has been a similar recycling over time as ideas have come and gone. The study of institutions has emerged, faded away and returned in a new form. So have the study of history, and cultural approaches in both politics and sociology. Normative theory, marginalized during the behaviouralist revolution, has made a strong comeback. Much confusion is caused by the habit of re-inventing old ideas but giving them new labels. There is also a tendency for those advancing new ideas (or often just new terms) to present a simplified caricature of their predecessors, thus preventing us from building on past knowledge and advancing theoretically and methodologically.

As editors of this collection, we do not believe that a unified global social science is possible or, given the nature of the matters addressed, desirable. Yet there are better opportunities for cross-fertilization and synthesis than there

have been for some time, as scholars grow weary of debates in which the protagonists just talk past each other. We hope to show how the various approaches intersect, and the points in common as well as the points of difference. The chapters that follow do not read as a unified or continuous whole. We have encouraged authors to emphasize the distinctive features of the approach they are describing, and readers will appreciate that each is bringing his/her own interpretation and perspective.

The chapters

The next chapter, by della Porta and Keating, asks how many approaches there are in the social sciences and how compatible they are with each other. We distinguish among ontologies and epistemologies, or how we know the social world; methodologies, in the form of coherent research designs; and methods, the tools of the trade. While these are linked, there is no one-to-one connection from choices at one level to those at the others. Epistemological debates often pit positivists or realists, who believe in the concrete reality of social phenomena, against constructivists or interpretivists, who emphasize human perception and interpretation. We argue that matters are more complicated, with a spectrum of positions between these extremes. Methodological debates are often framed as a confrontation between the quantitative methodologies used by positivists and the qualitative ones used by constructivists and interpretivists. There is indeed a school of positivist scholars wedded to hard data and quantification, and another school that uses softer data for interpretation; but many social scientists combine approaches. As for methods, these are merely ways of acquiring information. Tools such as surveys, interviews and analysis of texts are used for a variety of purposes and with different epistemological bases. We conclude the chapter by showing how different approaches and methodologies can and cannot be combined, a question to which we return in the final chapter.

For much of the twentieth century, social science sought theories of politics and society that could explain outcomes in a rigorous causal manner, eliminating all value judgements. Questions of values and the 'good society' were relegated to philosophy, where they were addressed in an abstract manner. This contrasts with an earlier tradition in which some of the classical sociologists and political analysts were consciously seeking ways to improve social institutions. Rainer Bauböck, in Chapter 3, shows how normative considerations have come back into social science in recent decades, starting with

theories of social justice and moving into other concerns such as self-determination and competing conceptions of liberalism and democracy. He argues that normative questions are unavoidable in social science, since concepts are often normatively charged, especially when dealing with questions of power and its legitimation. Bauböck goes on to explain how normative theory and empirical research can be combined, in the empirical study of attitudes and beliefs; in institutionally embedded norms; in qualitative case studies including legal judgments; and in quantitative comparative cases. He concludes with some remarks on the ethics of normative theorizing and the position of the political theorist in present-day political debates.

The next two chapters address what are often considered as polar-opposite approaches. Adrienne Héritier starts from positivist premises in presenting an account of causal analysis in social science, which seeks to create generalizable knowledge about the world on the assumption that the world is real, ordered, structured and knowable. Antecedent events are taken as the cause of subsequent ones and we can, through accumulated knowledge, discover how particular causes will be followed by particular effects. Often this knowledge is probabilistic in that there are other factors at work, but in principle these could be known and accounted for if all the necessary information were available. Sometimes theories are built up from the accumulation of knowledge of particular cases, but most social science will start with a theory, expressed as a hypothesis as to what will follow a particular cause, which is then tested against reality. Such hypotheses should be internally consistent, logically complete and falsifiable. Once an association between a cause and an effect has been established, there are ways to flesh out the causal mechanisms. Another form of causal analysis works backwards from a known outcome and seeks complex explanations through modules, each of which explains part of the outcome.

Critically discussing some of the assumptions of causal analysis, Friedrich Kratochwil takes up one of the key questions posed in Chapter 1, about what we know and how we know it. In the constructivist perspective, social scientists deal not with a given, objective and undisputed real world, but with concepts. Concepts and theories can never be disproved by reference to a separate reality; rather, they are confronted by other concepts and theories. This does *not* entail two further propositions sometimes attributed to constructivists – that the physical world is merely the product of our imagination, and that any proposition can be asserted to be as valid as any other without need for proof or demonstration. On the contrary, it is incumbent upon social scientists to specify the frames within which they make truth claims. In explaining social

behaviour, attention must be paid to the perceptions and motivations of actors. Explanations of social behaviour may be multiple, operating at different levels and asking different sorts of questions – about proximate causes, actor motivation, large structures or causal chains, for example.

The history of social science, we have argued, is not a matter of progressing to ever better theories and methods, but rather of successive efforts to capture the social world and to answer questions that themselves may be different. It is not a search for a complete set of concepts that would be inclusive, in covering the entire world, and exclusive, in the sense of not overlapping with each other. Concepts, rather, overlap, and the same thing may be explained using various different tools. At one time, the concept of culture was used rather carelessly to explain differences between national societies. During the behavioural revolution, this approach was downplayed as scholars sought universal patterns and context-free knowledge, pushing cultural explanations to the margins with a view to eliminating them altogether. In recent years, it has made something of a comeback as a way of resolving some of the big questions outlined above. Michael Keating argues that it addresses the relationship of the individual to the collective level, of ideas to interests and of the past to the present and the future. It does not provide an explanation for everything, and it overlaps with other concepts. Culture is located neither at the level of the individual nor at that of a reified society, but at the inter-subjective level, where it provides a means for identifying group boundaries, interpreting events and according value. It is not amenable to the positivist language of independent and dependent variables. It is not primordial or unchanging, but adapts to events even as it shapes them. Culture is notoriously difficult to measure. Surveys can capture value differences among individuals but are not always reliable when we move to the collective level. Stereotypes may get in the way of understanding how societies really work. The best approaches consist of a triangulation of survey methods, ethnographic studies and case work.

The following chapters address some main theoretical developments in the social sciences. Sven Steinmo charts the rise of the new institutionalism as a corrective to the universalizing, behaviouralist accounts of the 1960s. While 'old' institutionalists (including many European social scientists) took institutions as sets of binding rules, new institutionalists have a more sociological conception. There are three varieties of new institutionalism. For rational choice institutionalists, institutions shape the patterns of incentives and sanctions available to individuals making decisions. Sociological institutionalists see people as being socialized by institutions, so that their behaviour is shaped by what they have learnt to see as appropriate. Historical institutionalists can

accept both of these accounts, but emphasize the importance of context and of the historical order of events. History is not a chain of independent events but a sequence in which one happening influences the next. In this way, these scholars seek to account for both continuity and change over time. Although they use various methodologies, historical institutionalists share the methodological challenge of bringing history back into the social sciences. They are sceptical of the idea of independent variables that can be isolated to measure the effect of each, since factors constantly interact with each other. If there is a scientific analogy, it is with biology rather than physics. Historical institutionalists are interested in specific cases and the comparison of a small number of cases rather than generalizations over large numbers of cases.

Two chapters examine theories of action. We have not included a separate chapter on rational choice theory. The older debates about rational choice theory have become rather exhausted, and rational choice theory itself has become more sophisticated and variegated over the years. The classic objection is that the rational choice assumption that people are rationally calculating utility-maximizers is either wrong (since some people are altruistic) or tautological (if utility is stretched to include altruistic behaviour). Debating this issue would not take us much further. Instead, Christine Chwaszcza takes us into game theory. She starts from the classic assumptions of rational choice theory – consequentialism, utility theory and methodological individualism. Individualist rational choice approaches to explanation have been criticized for their demanding assumptions about how individuals actually make decisions, and for failing to take context and the actions of others into account. Game theory seeks to get around these problems by factoring in other actors and relaxing the assumption that all try to maximize their goals. Instead, the criterion of rational choice in game theory is the equilibrium principle, which takes into account the actions of others. This still depends, however, on strictly consequentialist thinking with the result that actors can find themselves in paradoxes such as the prisoners' dilemma, in which each actor will choose the option that leaves both of them worse off. Sometimes there are two equilibria, each of which would maximize overall welfare (such as choosing to drive on the left or on the right); but rational choice and game theory in themselves do not indicate which one the individual actor should choose. More complicated still are cases with multiple equilibria in which the benefits to the various parties are unequal. Ways out of this problem include iterated games, in which the actors learn how to react, and evolutionary game theory, in which actors signal and learn and adapt to their environment. This takes us into more socially embedded forms of action in which institutions and norms help shape