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# BOOK REVIEWS

George Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. ix, 620, $25.95 (paperback). ISBN 0-8223-3518-2.

How has positivism influenced the social sciences? What exactly does the term mean for each of them? The essays collected in Part I of *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences* address these questions. The fields covered include anthropology, Asian studies (as an example of an area study), economics, political science and theory, social and cultural history, and sociology. There are also two essays that cover the interrelations between fields—one by Phil Mirowski on post-war positivist philosophy of science and economics, another by sociologist Margaret R. Somers on sociology and economics. The only glaring omission is psychology.

Part II of the book is more of a mixed bag, thematically. Some essays explore alternative approaches that have been recommended within specific social science fields. There are two essays on critical realism—one a general introduction by Andrew Collier and the other, by Tony Lawson, on its application to economics. Sandra Harding recommends a reformulated version of standpoint theory as a general tool for representing and understanding social justice movements. There are two essays, one on psychoanalysis and the other on political theory (which is a term used by political scientists that might translate in economics as "political philosophy"), both of which note that the approach in question, though typically viewed as anti-positivist, still accepts certain positivist pre-suppositions. Daniel Breslau criticizes economic methodology in general and the rhetoric and critical realist approaches in particular, and proposes in their place a sociological study of the behavior of economists. Andrew Abbott compares "the idea of outcome" in sociology, where the causal explanatory chain typically runs from the past to the present, to economics, where choice decisions are driven by expectations of the future. Geoff Eley offers a personal view of the movement from social to cultural history in Britain—one that nicely compliments William Sewell's account of the same phenomenon in the United States in Part I. In a concluding essay Michael Burawoy calls for a provincializing of the social sciences, a negation of the positivist dream of unified science.

I came to the book as an historian of economic thought who has an interest in methodological questions and who wondered what impact positivism has had in other social science disciplines. Some of the papers were better than others in helping to explicate this. Certain main claims stand out. For example, Webb Keane asserts that positivist ideas never really took hold in anthropology, and that this makes sense: if one seeks to understand the specific contours of a different culture, then "particularism and an epistemology of intimacy" is more appropriate than a search for general laws (pp. 65, 75). (It seems to me that this account neglects the subfield of physical

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anthropology.) Positivism (re)entered history in the 1960s and 1970s with the rapid rise of social history, which required the compilation and analysis of massive amounts of demographic and other data. Just as quickly it was superseded in the 1980s by the cultural turn, where the subject matter (the lives of everyday people, at work, home, or play) is the same but the method (excavating their practices and mentalities) is different. Though economics is discussed in a number of the essays, different conclusions are reached as to what extent it exhibits positivist tendencies.

An emergent theme is that the word positivism carries different connotations in the various fields, and even sometimes among practitioners in the same field. Positive can be contrasted with normative. It can refer to the idea that the only legitimate knowledge is that derived from the senses, and that science should only make reference to observable behavior, as in behaviorism. It can mean that the use of statistical methods (as in social history) is preferable to more interpretive approaches (as might be employed in cultural history or anthropology). It may mean that the scientist should search for regularities, or laws, rather than to try to identify the idiosyncratic or the unique. It might mean an emphasis on creating instruments that yield accurate predictions rather than constructing theories that have real referents. It might simply be a codeword for ''objective'' or ''scientific'' among those who value such attributes, or one for ''scientistic'' or ''pseudoscientific'' among those who may question them.

As the title of the book signals, many of the authors also assert that the methods of the social sciences support particular political ends, namely, the defense of late capitalism, of neo-liberalism, of the privatization of the social, and so on. Thus we find that the concept of social capital is a sham, for ''it vindicates antistatism by blaming 'civic decline' on the usual sociological suspects of the welfare state and its ancilliary social supports'' (p. 272). The proposal to provincialize the social sciences is justified as follows: ''To provincialize is to burst the bubble of disinterested knowledge and to address the role of social science in supplying ideologies that justify market tyranny and state unilateralism'' (p. 509). Depending on the reader's politics, these asides might either be viewed as an added bonus or as a source of growing irritation. For me the latter was the case, with the exception of the essays in which a position was actually argued for (the best of these were the essays by Mirowski, Harding, the historians, and the volume editor) instead of being taken as given. These essays contain much I agree with, and much that I do not, but by providing an argument they also provide a framework for further discussion and debate.

Given my prior interests, the book is too long (do any presses have real editors anymore?), it should have had a chapter on psychology, and the authors should have restrained their urge to establish their political bona fides. (I realize with some horror that I am here longing for the good old positivist days when real scientists kept their values to themselves.) But it serves the useful function of introducing social scientists to the nature of the methodological debates in other social science fields.

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