On the Logic of the Social Sciences

Jürgen Habermas

translated by
Shierry Weber Nicholsen
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Polity Press

This work originally appeared in German as a special supplemental volume of the journal *Philosophische Rundschau* in February 1967. It was published in book form in the volume entitled *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* © 1970 Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, Federal Republic of Germany

First published in Great Britain 1988 by Polity Press in association with
Basil Blackwell
First published in paperback 1990

Editorial office:
Polity Press, 65 Bridge Street,
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Basil Blackwell Ltd
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

ISBN 0 7456 0541 9
ISBN 0 7456 0862 0 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

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

Printed in the United States of America.

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Introduction

Thomas McCarthy

When it first appeared in 1967, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* challenged the existing division of labor between the sciences and the humanities: "While the natural sciences and the humanities are able to live side by side, in mutual indifference if not in mutual admiration, the social sciences must resolve the tension between the two approaches and bring them under one roof." At that time discussions of the methodology of science were still dominated by logical positivism. Kuhn's pathbreaking work, published a few years earlier, had only begun to make itself felt among philosophers of natural science; in the philosophy of social science it was, and was to remain for some time to come, only a distant rumbling. Thus Habermas's main concern was to challenge the hegemony of "empirical-analytical" conceptions of social science, to show, in particular, that access to the symbolically structured object domain of social inquiry called for procedures similar in important respects to those developed in the text-interpreting humanities. In making this point, he was already able to draw upon insights developed in the phenomenological (Schutz), ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, Cicourel), linguistic (Wittgenstein, Winch), and hermeneutic (Gadamer) traditions, and on this basis to mount an argument that anticipated in all essential respects the subsequent decline of positivism and rise of interpretivism.

If this were all there were to the story, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* would be primarily of historical interest as a striking anticipation of contemporary developments. But there is more. Habermas argued just as forcefully against swinging to the opposite extreme of "hermeneutic idealism," which has since achieved something of

a counterhegemony in the philosophy of social science (but not, of course, in the practice of social research). The point was—and is—to bring explanatory and interpretive approaches "under one roof," as Max Weber had already seen. Thus we have here not only an anticipation of the retreat of positivism, but a critique-in-advance of the absolutizing of interpretive approaches that followed. If social research is not to be restricted to explicating, reconstructing, and deconstructing meanings, we must somehow grasp the objective interconnections of social actions, the "meanings" they have beyond those intended by actors or embedded in traditions. We must, in short, view culture in relation to the material conditions of life and their historical transformation.

With this in mind, Habermas goes on here to examine functionalist approaches, in particular, the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons. He finds that the attempt to conceive of the social system as a functional complex of institutions in which cultural patterns are made normatively binding for action does furnish us with important tools for analyzing objective interconnections of action; but it suffers from a short-circuiting of the hermeneutic and critical dimensions of social analysis: "In the framework of action theory, motives for action are harmonized with institutional values.... We may assume, however, that repressed needs which are not absorbed into social roles, transformed into motivations, and sanctioned, nevertheless have their interpretations. Either these interpretations 'overshoot' the existing order and, as utopian anticipations, signify a not-yet-successful group identity; or, transformed into ideologies, they serve projective substitute gratification as well as the justification of repressing authorities." Habermas argues that if the analysis of social systems were fully to incorporate these dimensions, it could no longer be understood as a form of empirical-analytical science on the model of biology; it would have to be transformed into a historically oriented theory of society with a practical intent. The form such a theory would take is that of a "systematically generalized history" that reflectively grasped the formative process of society as a whole, reconstructing the contemporary situation with a view not only to its past but to its practically anticipated future as well. This is, in fact, what the classical social theorists were after—from the natural history of civil society of the Scottish moralists, through Marx's historical materialism, to Weber's theory of rationalization.

And yet, Habermas maintains, they were unable to grasp the methodological specificity of such a theoretically informed and practically oriented history; instead, they tried repeatedly, and in vain, to assimilate it to the strictly nomological sciences of nature.

Habermas finds in psychoanalysis the most suggestive model for reconceptualizing and reintegrating the explanatory and interpretive, functionalist and narrative elements required for social theory. Anticipating the extended discussion of Freud in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (which was published in the following year), he views psychoanalytic theory as a general interpretive scheme of psychodynamic development, whose application to the narrative reconstruction of individual life histories calls for a peculiar combination of interpretive understanding and causal explanation, and whose corroboration depends in the last analysis on the successful continuation of those same life histories. In an analogous way, critical social theory undertakes a narrative reconstruction of the self-formative process of society, with a view to its successful continuation: "In place of the goal-state of a self-regulating system, we would have the end-state of a formative process. A hermeneutically enlightened and historically oriented functionalism ... is guided by an emancipatory cognitive interest that aims at reflection.... The species too constitutes itself in formative processes, which are sedimented in the structural change of social systems, and which can be reflected, that is, systematically narrated from an anticipated point of view."

Since publishing *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, Habermas has considerably expanded upon a number of its key elements. Thus, for example, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, functionalism, and systems theory have come in for extended discussion in later writings. And although Habermas could write in 1982 that he still found the basic line of argument correct, he has altered his position in a number of important respects. The idea of founding social-scientific inquiry in a theory of language, which already existed in germ in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, came to dominate his work on universal pragmatics and rational reconstruction in the later sixties and early seventies. Toward the end of the 1970s he started the turn that culminated in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, a turn marked by the warning that methodology and epistemology are no royal road to social theory. Rather, questions concerning the

logic of social inquiry can fruitfully be pursued only in connection with substantive questions—the theory of communicative action is not constructed in a methodological perspective. Despite these changes and developments, and despite the altered context of contemporary discussions in the philosophy of social science, the present work has somehow retained its power and fascination. Perhaps this is because it avoids the one-sidedness that still marks the views of the principal protagonists, and unlike them finds something of value in all of the major contending approaches to social inquiry, something worth preserving and reconstituting. Perhaps it is because Habermas here anticipates so many of the issues and themes that occupy us today, and does so with a sharpness that has not been surpassed. Or perhaps it is because Habermas's earlier sketch of a critical theory of the present—in the form of a systematically generalized narrative constructed with the practical intent of changing things for the better—has lost none of its appeal, even when viewed in the light of his later, more emphatically theoretical undertakings.

Translator's Note

I would like to thank Arden Nicholsen and Jeremy J. Shapiro for their help in the preparation of this translation. Both of them read drafts of the manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions and criticisms.

Shierry Weber Nicholsen

Preface

This review of literature pertaining to the logic of the social sciences was written in the mid-1960s, when analytic philosophy of science, with its program for a unified science, still largely dominated the self-understanding of sociologists.[1] It contributed to the basic changes in that situation that took place in the following decade. My discussion not only continued Adorno's critique of positivism but also directed attention to the spectrum of nonconventional approaches—including the later Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Gadamer's hermeneutics, and the phenomenological ethnomethodology stemming from Schutz—which, as Richard Bernstein noted a decade later, gave rise to a "restructuring of social theory."[2] The appropriation of hermeneutics and linguistic analysis convinced me then that critical social theory had to break free from the conceptual apparatus of the philosophy of consciousness flowing from Kant and Hegel.[3] The methodological (in the narrower sense) fruits of my efforts consisted chiefly in uncovering the dimension in which the symbolically prestructured object domain of social science could be approached through interpreting meaning.[4] This reconstruction of the buried hermeneutic dimension—whose rediscovery within analytic philosophy was to await the Popper-Kuhn debates[5]—had to be combined with an argument against hermeneutics' claim to universality.[6]

This review was written for a particular occasion. One reason for

These remarks are taken from the author's preface to the fifth edition of "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," which appeared in 1982 as part of a larger collection with the same title: *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag), pp. 89–330.

its cursory character is that I am not a specialist in this area. Moreover, the logic of research has always interested me only in connection with questions of social theory. To be sure, I was convinced for a time that the project of a critical social theory had to prove itself, in the first instance, from a methodological and epistemological standpoint. This was reflected in the fact that I held out the prospect of "grounding the social sciences in a theory of language" in the preface to the 1970 edition of this work. This is a prospect I no longer entertain. The theory of communicative action that I have since put forward[7] is not a continuation of methodology by other means. It breaks with the primacy of epistemology and treats the presupposition of action oriented to mutual understanding *independently* of the transcendental preconditions of knowledge. This turn from the theory of knowledge to the theory of communication makes it possible to give substantive answers to questions that, from a metatheoretical vantage point, could only be elucidated as questions and clarified in respect to their presuppositions.

Munich
August 1982

On the Logic of the Social Sciences

I

The Dualism of the Natural and Cultural Sciences

The once lively discussion initiated by Neo-Kantianism concerning the methodological distinctions between natural-scientific and social-scientific inquiry has been forgotten; the problems that gave rise to it no longer seem to be of contemporary relevance. Scientistic consciousness obscures fundamental and persistent differences in the methodological approaches of the sciences. The positivistic self-understanding prevalent among scientists has adopted the thesis of the unity of sciences; from the positivist perspective, the dualism of science, which was considered to be grounded in the logic of scientific inquiry, shrinks to a distinction between levels of development. At the same time, the strategy based on the program of a unified science has led to indisputable successes. The nomological sciences, whose aim it is to formulate and verify hypotheses concerning the laws governing empirical regularities, have extended themselves far beyond the sphere of the theoretical natural sciences, into psychology and economics, sociology and political science. On the other hand, the historical-hermeneutic sciences, which appropriate and analyze meaningful cultural entities handed down by tradition, continue uninterrupted along the paths they have been following since the nineteenth century. There is no serious indication that their methods can be integrated into the model of the strict empirical sciences. Every university catalogue provides evidence of this actual division between the sciences; it is unimportant only in the textbooks of the positivists.

This continuing dualism, which we take for granted in the *practice* of science, is no longer discussed in terms of the *logic* of science. Instead of being addressed at the level of the philosophy of science, it

simply finds expression in the coexistence of two distinct frames of reference. Depending upon the type of science with which it is concerned, the philosophy of science takes the form either of a general methodology of the empirical sciences or of a general hermeneutics of the cultural and historical sciences. At this time the work of K. R. Popper[1] and H. G. Gadamer can be taken as representative of state-of-the-art formulations of this specifically restricted self-reflection of the sciences. Neither analytic philosophy of science nor philosophical hermeneutics takes any notice of the other; only seldom do their discussions step outside the boundaries of their respective realms, which are both terminologically and substantively distinct.[2] The analytic school dismisses the hermeneutic disciplines as prescientific, while the hermeneutic school considers the nomological sciences as characterized by a limited preunderstanding.

The mutually uncomprehending coexistence of analytical philosophy of science and philosophical hermeneutics troubles the rigid self-consciousness of neither of the two parties. Occasional attempts to bridge the gap have remained no more than good intentions.[3] There would be no reason to touch on the well-buried issue of the dualism of science if it did not in one area continually produce symptoms that demand analytic resolution: in the social sciences, heterogeneous aims and approaches conflict and intermingle with one another. To be sure, the current state of the various social-scientific disciplines indicates a lack of even development; for this reason it is easy to ascribe unclarified methodological issues and unresolved controversies to a confusion that can be remedied through logical clarification and a program of unified science. Hence the positivists do not hesitate to start from scratch. According to their postulates, a general and, in principle, unified *empirical-analytic behavioral science*, not different in structure from the theoretical natural sciences, can be produced from the purified corpus of the traditional social sciences.[4] Steps in this direction have been taken in psychology and social psychology. Economics, with the exception of econometrics, is organized on the model of a *normative-analytic science* that presupposes hypothetical maxims of action. Sociological research is carried out primarily within the *structural-functional framework* of a theory of action that can neither be reduced to observable behavior nor reconstructed on the model of purposive-rational action.

Finally, much research in sociology and political science is historically oriented, without any intentional link to general theories.

As I shall demonstrate, all three of these theoretical approaches can lay claim to a relative legitimacy. Contrary to what positivism assumes, they are not based on faulty or unclear methodological presuppositions. Nor can the more complex of these approaches be reduced, without damage, to the platform of a general science of behavior. Only at first glance does the confusion seem capable of being eliminated through clear-cut distinctions. Rather, the competing approaches that have been developed within the social sciences are negatively interrelated, in that they all stem from the fact that the apparatus of general theories cannot be applied to society in the same way as to objectified natural processes. Whereas the natural and the cultural or hermeneutic sciences are capable of living in a mutually indifferent, albeit more hostile than peaceful, coexistence, the social sciences must bear the tension of divergent approaches under one roof, for in them the very practice of research compels reflection on the relationship between analytic and hermeneutic methodologies.

1 A Historical Reconstruction

1.1 Rickert was the first to try to grasp the dualism of the natural and the cultural sciences in a methodologically rigorous way. He restricted the claims of Kant's critique of reason to the realm of the nomological sciences in order to make a place for the cultural sciences, which Dilthey had raised to epistemological status.[5] Rickert's efforts remain within the framework of transcendental philosophy. Whereas phenomena are constituted as "nature" under general laws through the categories of the understanding, "culture" is formed through the relation of facts to a system of values. Cultural phenomena owe their unique historical significance to this individualizing value-relationship. Rickert perceived the logical impossibility of the strictly idiographic science that Windelband proposed.[6]

He acknowledged as a fact the unique achievement of the sciences based on understanding (*verstehende Wissenschaften*): they grasp the unique, that is, unrepeatable meaning of historical events in expressions that are at the same time inevitably general and thus

oriented toward what can be repeated. But he could not provide a satisfactory explanation for this fact.

Rickert presupposes—and here he is covertly in accordance with *Lebensphilosophie*—the irrationality of a reality that is integrally present only in nonlinguistic experience: it disintegrates into alternative viewpoints under the transcendentally mediated grasp of the mind engaged in knowledge. These complementary aspects, in terms of which reality must be grasped in the form either of lawful continuity or of heterogeneous particularity, remain separate and distinct. In choosing an appropriate theoretical system we are presented with mutually exclusive alternatives in which the statements of one system cannot be transformed into statements of the other. Only the term "heterogeneous continuum" represents the unity of a reality that, from the transcendental perspective, has been divided; no synthesis produced by the finite understanding corresponds to this purely extrapolated unity. But how can the same reality that is grasped as nature under general laws be individualized through value-relational categories, if these categories themselves must have the logical status of universals? Rickert postulates that values do not have the same logical status as class concepts. He asserts that cultural phenomena are not subsumed by the values that constitute them in the same way that elements are subsumed in a class.[7] But this claim cannot be made good within the framework in which it is posed, that of transcendental logic. Rickert can only sketch the concept of a historical totality, because he distrusts the dialectical tools that would allow him to grasp it. A logic of the cultural sciences that proceeds on the basis of a transcendental critique of consciousness cannot avoid the dialectic of the particular and the general that Hegel identified. This leads beyond Hegel to the concept of the cultural phenomenon as that which is historically individuated, that which demands to be identified precisely as something nonidentical.[8]

The philosophy of value (*Wertphilosophie*) itself arises from the same ambivalence of an uncompleted transition from Kant to Hegel. Rickert begins by constructing the concept of culture on the basis of transcendental idealism. Like the category of nature, the category of culture, as representing a totality of phenomena under a system of prevailing values, has transcendental significance; it says nothing

about objects themselves but rather determines the conditions of the possible apprehension of objects.

To this construction corresponds the optimistic assumption that a system of values can be deduced a priori from practical reason.[9] But Rickert soon had to abandon this idea.[10] The actual profusion of so-called values could be deciphered only in the real context of cultures in which the value-oriented action of historical subjects had been objectivated—even if the validity of those values was independent of these origins. If this is to be conceded, then the Neo-Kantian concept of culture succumbs to the transcendental-empirical ambiguity that found its dialectical development in Hegel's concept of objective spirit, but that Neo-Kantians had to reject. The cultural sciences encounter their object in preconstituted form. The cultural meanings of empirically functioning values systems are derived from value-oriented action. For this reason, the transcendentally mediated accomplishments of subjects whose actions are oriented to values are at once both incorporated into and preserved in the empirical form of historically sedimented and transmitted values.

With history, a dimension is brought into the object domain of science in which an element of transcendental consciousness is objectivated through the action of historical subjects; that is, a meaning is objectivated that in each case can claim validity only in terms of a transcendental network of values. Rickert tries to do justice to the objectivity of these historically real contexts of meaning with the concept of transcendental "ought."[11] But this concept only exemplifies the contradictions that the firm distinctions between facts and values, empirical being and transcendental validity, nature and culture, seek in vain to resolve. Because Rickert will not abandon the distinctions made by transcendental philosophy, they crumble in his hands despite his intentions. Through the breach of the transcendental "ought" a restoration rushes in that, in opposing Rickert, openly acknowledges in the philosophy of value something that lay hidden in Rickert's philosophy: an insipid ontology of ideal being (Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann).

Today the logic of science is no longer based on the Kantian critique of reason; it starts from the current state of self-reflection of the nomological and hermeneutic sciences. Analytic philosophy of science is content with rules for the logical construction and choice of general theories. It establishes a dualism between facts and pro-