PHILOSOPHY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

5 QUESTIONS

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What brought you to the philosophy of social science?

My interest in philosophical issues in the social sciences came early in my graduate education at the Harvard philosophy department in the early 1970s. I had studied the philosophy of science and the philosophy of psychology as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, and I was particularly excited by the work of Noam Chomsky on the intersection between language and cognition. As I left college I also began to develop a curiosity about Marx's theories, and in the first year or so as a graduate student I began reading Marx's work. As a second-year graduate student I organized a pair of undergraduate tutorials on the early Marx and the later Marx, which was a very good way to learn Marx's work. And I served as a graduate assistant in John Rawls's courses on political philosophy, in which Rawls gave several weeks of attention to Marx's early writings. (Rawls appeared to have minimal interest in the "social scientific" Marx of the later writings.) During graduate school I did a great deal of reading under my own direction of the classics of social theory—Weber, Durkheim, Simmel; also Marxist historical writings (Albert Soboul, E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Maurice Dobb, M. I. Finley); and such historical theorists as Immanuel Wallerstein. These sources gave me a deep fascination for the complexity of history and social processes and the variety of theoretical approaches that were possible for understanding this complexity. I had read much of the existing literature on the philosophy of social science (chiefly represented by the May Brodbeck anthology), which was largely inspired by a fairly positivistic and a priori approach to the subject. This approach I had found uninteresting, and incomparably less interesting than the specific empirical and theoretical work I was finding

in the social sciences and in the classics of social theory. By the midpoint of my graduate studies I had arrived at these foundational questions, which continue to captivate me: What makes a study of social phenomena "scientific"? What theoretical tools are available to serve as a basis for explanation in the domain of social outcomes and processes? And how can philosophers play a contributing role in arriving at intellectually powerful and empirically supportable insights into the causes of social and historical change?

When it came time to write a dissertation I decided to focus on Marx's economic writings, and I defined my subject as a study of the assumptions about social scientific knowledge that Marx made in *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*. I chose to focus my efforts by probing the epistemological frameworks and assumptions about social science that Marx made in his researches from the 1850s through the publication of *Capital* (1867). And I chose to approach the genre of the philosophy of social science, not through a canon of philosophers' writings, but through a concrete study of the scientific practice of one important founder of the social sciences, Marx. This meant posing new questions rather than following a script for analyzing a given set of philosophical problems. The result was a dissertation called *Marx's Capital: A Study in the Philosophy of Social Science*. The dissertation defined the problem as one of surveying the kinds of knowledge and explanations Marx attempted to offer of the social world and of the capitalist mode of production. The dissertation set its objective in these terms (the first words of the dissertation): "This thesis is an essay in the philosophy of social science. It is an attempt to address Marx's social theory as an important episode in the history of social science, and to try to uncover in detail its implicit standards of rational scientific practice.... It is important to try to discover the epistemological and methodological characteristics which define it, or in other words, to discover in detail the standards of empirical rationality which underlie its scientific practice." The dissertation pointed out the importance of constructing philosophy of social science out of direct engagement with rigorous pieces of social scientific reasoning, and it rejected the idea of constructing philosophy of social science out of analogy with the natural sciences.

The dissertation was written just before the flourishing of a new current within Marxist theory, analytical Marxism. The dissertation was accepted in 1977, and it was my intention to publish it

as a book. However, the first valuable writings of the analytical Marxism were beginning to appear at that time—John McMurtry and Gerald Cohen in particular—and so I chose instead to re-think my findings and to formulate a new set of questions in light of the new discussions emerging. The result was *The Scientific Marx*, which was aimed at identifying the logical and methodological issues that genuinely mattered in assessing Marxism as a basis for social science research and theory. Several points were particularly significant: that Marx's treatment of capitalism does not amount to a unified theory, that there is no "dialectical method" at work, and that Marx's explanations are generally understandable along the lines of a "logic of institutions," in which the researcher identifies a set of institutional opportunities and constraints and works out the aggregate consequences for social outcomes when large numbers of prudent agents work within these institutions.

After completing *The Scientific Marx* I became interested in a series of debates that were occurring in Asian studies, particularly the "rational peasant" debate, the "moral economy" debate, and the "Chinese stagnation" debate. I undertook to analyze these extremely interesting discussions within the literature of Asian studies, using some of the analytical insights of the philosophy of social science. I found that scholars of Asian studies were particularly receptive to the incursions of a philosopher, and I took great benefit of the intellectual generosity of such scholars as historian Paul Cohen, political scientist James Scott, and anthropologist G. William Skinner. Jon Elster's book, *Explaining Technical Change*, served as an excellent model for me of a philosopher's approach to important issues in the logic of social science and history through careful study of several interesting cases. This research on debates in the China field resulted in a book called *Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Since then my work has focused on issues having to do with the logic and force of social explanation, and with the ontology of the social world. I have always tried to engage the philosophical issues by taking seriously the research and knowledge created in various areas of the social sciences. Interaction with working political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and Asian studies specialists has been an enormously fruitful part of my intellectual development.

A consistent and defining intuition that has guided my explorations of the logic of the social sciences is a deep dissatisfaction with the positivist philosophy of social science of the 1960s and an

abiding fascination with the work of innovative, rigorous historians and social scientists. The idea that positivism defines scientific rigor and the structure of scientific knowledge is a deeply unconvincing one when applied to the social sciences. The chestnuts of positivist philosophy of science—the covering law model, the search for unified theories of a domain of phenomena, the distinction between observation and theory, the hypothetico-deductive model, and the doctrine of the unity of science—do a bad job of measuring or illuminating the sociological imagination and the rigor of social science reasoning. Scientific method needs to be suited to the nature of the phenomena for which the science is constructed. The social world is variegated, heterogeneous, contingent, multi-causal, and plastic, and therefore the methods and theories of the social sciences need to be constructed with this heterogeneity in mind. The skills of a biographer, a medical diagnostician, a forensic engineer, or a literary critic are more relevant to the social sciences than those of an empirical chemist or a theoretical physicist. Social scientists are indeed rigorous and ingenious in their methods of probing the workings of social systems and structures; but we need to discover the specific features of the rigor that they achieve by examining their work in detail.

A concrete example of the collaborative engagement between philosophy and social science that I favor took the form of a two-year research fellowship from the Social Science Research Council under an innovative program called "International Peace and Security." The idea of the program was to encourage scholars outside of international relations to take a substantive interest in some aspect of international security. My topic was "Food Security and International Development," and I spent two years (1989–91) at Harvard's Center for International Affairs learning quite a bit of development economics and development theory. Particularly valuable were seminars and conversations with development economists at the Harvard Institute for International Development, area specialists on Asian development at Harvard and MIT, and practitioners of development policy in a variety of research organizations. Among the talented social scientists whose work stimulated my development as a philosopher of social science during these two years were Atul Kohli, Dwight Perkins, and Peter Timmer. This experience led to a different kind of interaction between philosophy and the social sciences—this time focused on issues of theoretical adequacy and normative analysis. How good a fit is there between development theories and the actual eco-

nomic and cultural experience of developing countries? And what role might theories of distributive justice play in the design of development policies? The first set of interests led me to conceptualize a volume in the philosophy of economics called *On the Reliability of Economic Models*, in which I invited a handful of philosophers to write on various technical features of contemporary economic theory and an equal number of economists to reply. (James Woodward and Nancy Cartwright contributed important essays on causal modeling in econometrics to this volume.) My own contribution was on the subject of the epistemic status of "computable general equilibrium models," a tool that was very much in vogue in development economics in the 1990s as a way of performing "experiments" involving changes in macro-economic variables and measuring the simulated results that came from these interventions. Eventually I published a book that resulted from the learning I did in these years, focused on the normative side of development theory, *The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty: Mapping the Ethical Dilemmas of Global Development.*

Which social sciences do you consider particularly interesting or challenging from a philosophical point of view?

I currently find one component of contemporary sociology most interesting, the field of comparative historical sociology. This is the body of work that involves comparative historical analysis of social institutions, processes, identities, or outcomes. Why do social revolutions occur or fail? Why are social welfare regimes so different across Western Europe and North America? What explains the different levels of militancy of East Coast and West Coast dockworkers? Researchers in this field are interested in discovering concrete social causes of important processes, and they endeavor to do so through somewhat detailed study of comparable historical cases. This is "small-N" research. Especially important leaders in this field were Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Barrington Moore, Jr. ; second – or third – wave contributors include Jack Goldstone, R. Bin Wong, George Steinmetz, and Julia Adams. Very important current work in the field includes contributions by Andrew Abbott, Kathleen Thelen, and Paul Pierson. Comparative historical sociology is a body of work that encompasses some degree of interdisciplinarity, in that some political scientists and anthropologists have also contributed to the literature. This approach has much in common with another

particularly fruitful strand of research in sociology and political science, the "new institutionalism" , since researchers in this tradition are particularly interested in discovering the differences in outcomes that are created by seemingly minor differences in the design of an institution.

This area of sociological research is particularly important, in my mind, for several reasons. First, these authors have largely rejected naturalistic models for social-science knowledge. They are not expecting to find exceptionless, cross-context "laws of society." Instead, they emphasize "constrained contingency." The ideas of path dependence, conjuncture of causes, contingency, and multiple possible causes and outcomes are embedded in the sociological imagination among these researchers. Second, they are nonetheless committed to finding explanations of social outcomes, and this means finding causes and constraints that lead collective behavior in one direction rather than another. For example, why did the Iranian Revolution take a very particular course of development, distinct from that of China and Cuba? Researchers have examined some processes in the three cases that are in common (social contention, social mobilization, social organization) and some features that are importantly different, and have come to analyses of the three revolutions that explains various features of their trajectories without hoping to reduce them all to a single theory of revolution. Third, these researchers emphasize rigor and methodological clarity, but they recognize the shortcomings of an exclusively statistical and "measurement of variables" methodology for the social sciences (large-N studies). They do not attempt to reduce the cases they consider to a small set of variables to be coded. Fourth, all these researchers have a common conviction that history matters; that the circumstances that were on the ground at the time of an important social change were themselves the result of important historical conditioning, and that it is an important piece of the sociological investigation to identify some of that historical setting. Finally, these researchers have often gone a bit further than some other areas of social science, in recognizing that "culture" matters, and that the tools of ethnographic interpretation are relevant and productive in areas outside of anthropological fieldwork.

Comparative historical sociology and the new institutionalism are significant examples of innovative social science for two reasons. First, the results are powerful, surprising, and insightful; this field of research has born very significant fruit. And second, the

success of the field appears to have much to do with the cluster of background assumptions that researchers bring about the nature of the social world: for example, the contingency of social processes, the plasticity of social institutions, the malleability of human behavior, and the historical constructed character of social identities. These background ontological assumptions allow comparative historical sociologists to construct research methods that are indeed appropriate to the subject matter.

How do you conceive of the relation between the social sciences and the natural sciences?

The social world is, of course, embedded within the natural world, and human beings are themselves natural organisms. Moreover, there are features of the natural order that are directly pertinent to social explanation: cycles of climate change, the hydrology of great river systems over a time frame of centuries, the mechanisms of proliferation of disease. And features of human cognition and memory—the proper subject matter of a natural-science precinct of psychology—are plainly pertinent to the explanation of social phenomena (the observed size limitations on voluntary forms of cooperation, for example). So we do not need to draw a bright line between the scope of the natural sciences and the distinctive subject matter of the social sciences. All that said, I believe it is very important to recognize that systems of social phenomena are highly dissimilar from systems of natural phenomena. Social entities have their properties in virtue of the behavior and dispositions of the individuals who make them up at a given time—unlike complexes of molecules or strata of soils, whose constituents have uniform and timeless characteristics. Human action is contingent, motivated, self-modifying, and plastic. And therefore social institutions and processes lack determinate and fixed properties. Herbert Simon's "science of the artificial" provides a better metaphor for the social sciences than does the idea of the science of the natural world; social institutions and constructs are more analogous to systems of technology and artifact than they are to causally ordered natural systems. Chemistry, physics, and biology do not provide useful metaphors or models for the representation and explanation of social systems. "States" are not like "metals," with a common underlying causal reality. Stanley Lieberson's studies of social phenomena that are plainly not law-governed but nonetheless sociological provide excellent models for how to think of the

subject matter of sociology—professional sports, patterns of first names, or the ways in which styles change over time.

What is the most important contribution that philosophy has made to the social sciences?

Important contributions from philosophers to the understanding and conduct of social science research might include these: clarification of the foundations of rational choice theory and the theory of rationality; clarification of the nature and mechanisms of collective action and collective entities; analysis of the meaning and methods of causal inference; explication of the notion of "causal mechanisms"; elaboration of the theory of supervenience as a solution to the relationship between social facts and facts about biological individuals; critique of functionalism as an explanatory strategy; re-interpretation of Marx's economic theories along the lines of "rational-choice Marxism."

Some of the contributions of philosophy to the social sciences have been on the detrimental side of the ledger: positivism, behaviorism, naturalism, the unity of science, and deconstruction, to name several. The deficiencies of these master theories of the social sciences derive from a common failing: the idea that there ought to be a single philosophical perspective that will drive the organization and development of social science knowledge. There is a moral here: when philosophers undertake to offer prescriptions for the social sciences at the highest level of generality, they generally miss the mark. When they focus on more specific issues that are of real working concern to social scientists, they make a meaningful and forward-moving contribution.

It is tempting to believe that continental philosophy may have made more of an enduring contribution to social inquiry through the elaboration of the ontology and methods of hermeneutics. It is true that there is a closer relationship between the "human sciences" and continental philosophy than between contemporary sociology and analytic philosophy. But much of that influence probably proceeds from working anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz rather than from technical hermeneutic philosophy. Analytic philosophy has the potential for contributing to social science research through some of its characteristic strengths when philosophers turn their attention to the social sciences—clarity, logical analysis of conceptual problems, and an insistence on rational standards of justification. These methodological characteristics are most valuable when exercised in concert with a real

knowledge of and sympathy for the current research practices of innovative social scientists. Harold Kincaid's work fits this ideal, as does that of Daniel Hausman in the philosophy of economics.

Which topics in the philosophy of social science will, and which should, receive more attention than in the past?

Topics that probably will receive more attention—perhaps with diminishing returns:

- The role of laws and generalizations in social science
- The degree to which social science theories do or should resemble theories in the natural sciences
- Further debates about individualism, holism, and reductionism
- Conceptual or ethical relativism as a putative discovery of anthropological study of radically different cultures
- Covering law model as an ideal for social-science explanations

Topics that will yield valuable results for the philosophy of social science:

- Social ontology—more focused investigation of the nature of social entities, ensembles, structures, organizations, and events
- Social causation—more detailed theorizing about the nature of social causation. How are social-causal powers conveyed?
- Exploration of agent-based modeling as a way of exploring the theoretical consequences of assumptions about motives, constraints, opportunities, and social institutions
- Critical studies of quantitative methodology—better analysis of the scope and limits of statistical reasoning about social entities, processes, and outcomes
- Exposition of the limits that exist on prediction and the use of social and behavioral research to produce "social-engineering" applications to social policy.

- Studies of the logical and historical relations that exist among the disciplines and their domains of inquiry.

What are the most fundamental observations about the social sciences that you have come to through your research?

I have come to a small handful of central and iconoclastic reflections about social science theory, research, and explanation that I think are particularly fundamental:

- The social world is heterogeneous in multiple ways: causally, institutionally, organizationally, historically, and behaviorally.
- Social "things" (organizations, institutions, structures) are plastic and modifiable, and they do not fall into "social kinds" (in analogy with natural kinds).
- Social change is contingent and multi-causal.
- Social causation works through the mechanism of individual agents within concrete social settings, and nothing else.
- We need to look for "microfoundations" of social processes, causes, and facts.
- The key to social process and change is the action of the socially-situated agent making deliberate choices within given circumstances.
- Social identities and psychologies are themselves the product of prior "microfoundational" processes.
- We should not expect strong unifying theories that will "explain" all or most social phenomena.
- We should not expect strong regularities or laws among social phenomena.
- The natural sciences are a poor model for conceptualizing the nature of the social sciences.
- The social sciences are currently in need of some very basic new thinking, and philosophy of social science can play a very helpful role in this re-thinking.