

Chapter One

AN OVERVIEW

PRELUDE

Political decisions, and the public policies which result in them, are often based on little more than hunch and guesswork, combined with political bias. For example, it is rare to find a pragmatic view of the market which takes account of when it can be effective, and when relying on the market will have less desirable consequences. Policies on such matters as crime, housing and immigration, with serious social consequences, are often plucked out of the air, with no apparent effort made either to draw on existing knowledge, or to investigate before acting.

It is possible to do a lot better by adopting a scientific approach to social questions. No doubt very often the scientific answer to a question where we would like to have an answer is that we just do not know. Politicians are almost all of the view that the public would rather be given a definite answer which in fact has no basis than be told that while there is a problem, it is uncertain as to whether the proposed action will be helpful. This desire for authority, sometimes called leadership, acts against a more scientific approach.

For many, the mere suggestion that human affairs can be examined scientifically is anathema. It seems to imply that political choice must be reduced, or skewed in a particular direction. But that is entirely false. Another objection is rooted in the view that human affairs are beyond scientific investigation. It is vain, so the claim goes, and diminishing of human potential, to think that such an endeavour could be anything other than sham and pretence. Again, this is a mistaken concern.

One can argue the toss back and forth about a scientific approach to society in an abstract matter. Much better is to take a hard look at what is actually going on in social science. This book tells the reader what is, and what is not, social science. It is desperately important that more people, especially the right people, become aware of this branch of knowledge. The book has a snarling face, and a smiling face. It is angry with people who intentionally, or unconsciously, confuse and mess up intellectual endeavour. The book shows how to identify these social science impostors. At the same time, it tries to appeal to people who work in social science, or who want to know about their work. Even many specialists are unaware of what goes on in neighbouring disciplines. Above all, this book is addressed to those who should be aware of this branch of science. These are the people who take decisions that affect the lives of other people.

NORMAL SCIENCE

This is an unusual book about science. Most books on science cover the great ideas of key figures in science. They tend to concentrate on critical moments when big breakthroughs occurred. Science becomes drama and adventure. We suddenly discover a new and intriguing concept, such as chaos theory. Small changes in initial conditions can have huge consequences, raising deep issues about predictability. Science writers report on things like the race to crack the genetic code, or a new theory about dinosaurs and why they disappeared. This is entirely understandable.

There is a little problem in concentrating on great thinkers and big changes. Science is not like that. Scientific work goes on day by day, and it is done by reasonably intelligent and well-trained people who do useful work within a structure of ideas and information. Amazingly, that structure gets better as time goes by. It enables us to understand and do things today that we could not have understood or done in the past.

In this book I take a recent period, most of the decade of the 1990s, and examine the workings of a branch of science over that period. Due to the progressing nature of science, I would have preferred to deal with the decade ending on the date of publication of this book. Unfortunately, that was not possible. It takes time to analyse material and produce a book. The period on which I report is the most recent I could manage. It is an ordinary period in the story of science, much like any other ordinary period, as well as being the most recent I could manage. What we see is how science is actually working today, or just a few days ago.

SOCIAL SCIENCE

The branch of science I am writing about is a large branch that goes under the name of social science. The term covers a number of distinct disciplines, such as economics and political science. Social science is about human beings and what goes on in their institutions and interactions. Society is fundamental to human existence and therefore can be transparent. One might not be aware of it. In the same way, fish probably do not have a concept of water. They live in it and that is the way things are. What occupies their attention is food, mating, and getting away from predators.

Humans also think about fulfilling their needs, wishes, aspirations and desires, and may or may not be aware that all this takes place in a social medium. Humans interact with each other in face-to-face interactions, and in very remote and round about ways. The social unit, so to speak, may be a few friends, a workplace, a town, and all the way up to a giant nation, and beyond. Social science studies all levels from the family to the global society, and how the various levels affect each other.

Turning to animals instead of humans for a moment, we might note that some animals are loners, only getting together in pairs to reproduce. Others are very social. What it means to be 'very social' is that they are continually relating to each other. Social animals typically develop a hierarchy, and take their places in it. A single individual, or a few of them, may impose actions on the rest. Alternatively, the social system may be self-organising without any key figures. Males and females may behave differently. There may be division of labour, in the sense that some members of an animal group may specialise in defence against enemies, or in raising the young, or in providing food. The social behaviour of animals is an interesting and increasingly studied area.

The study of social interaction among humans can provide insights into understanding animal interactions, and the social behaviour of animals may be helpful in understanding some aspects of human society. In spite of the scope for cross fertilisation of ideas, essentially the subjects are separate. Social science, as the term is generally used, is about human society. That is how it is used in this book.

Most people start out in some kind of family. They pick up one or more languages. They are socialised into patterns of behaviour. They take part in institutions such as schools, prisons, armies, clubs, churches, professions, and productive units like stores, farms, factories and offices. People have multiple and interacting affiliations. Simultaneously they are part of a family, a friendship circle, an ethnic grouping, a community, a working association, a fan club, a religion, and so on. They are subject to social forces, which come from close by, along with forces whose origins are quite

remote. By remote forces I mean effects associated with markets, as well as those coming from political pressure and the laws and conventions of a society.

Some individuals may have important positions in one or more markets, or in the law making activities of government. They may be active in shaping laws and taking market decisions. While some individuals appear to have power, and probably can exercise power, when it comes to these more remote social forces, most people have little say and are simply swept along with the flow. Social science studies all of this, the face-to-face and the more distant social interactions.

Social science directs particular attention to those aspects of society when and where things go wrong. Big areas of enquiry are unemployment, or rioting and war, or crime and social disaffection. But social science is also interested in the ordinary and normal such as skateboarding and other fashions, how people team up in marriage and in other ways, and decisions such as moving from one place to another. Social scientists study both social problems and social non-problems. Both are studied out of inherent interest, and with the object of finding solutions. The study of non-problematic social interactions, institutions and events, as well as being inherently interesting, can be important to the understanding of social problems.

Few people have any difficulty with the notion that someone might want to investigate the public transport system of a city. The investigator might want to find out how the system works in the sense of who controls it and how it is financed. They might be interested in the relation between those managerial and finance features and the performance of the transport system in moving people about. Probably the study of the system will have the goal of trying to improve the performance of it. All this is easy to grasp.

Another investigator might be interested in whether people are marrying younger, getting divorced more frequently, and the consequences of these trends for child development. Again, this is understandable, and the motive for that investigation might be its potential for recommending helpful changes in the divorce laws, and in the laws on child custody. Ultimately this kind of research hopes to be part of a process leading to an improvement in existing laws and practices. The difficulty in understanding the concept of social science comes in convincing people that the transport system and the marriage system both have aspects that fall within the domain of social science.

Any social arrangement is part of the subject matter of social science, from a bowling club to a parliament. How to win bowling matches is not part of social science, though conceivably the social organisation of clubs could have some bearing on competitive success. It is the common element

of people interacting through large scale or small scale means, through large institutions like the World Bank and the global financial markets, and through smaller groupings like street gangs, which is studied by social science. That these matters, these interactions, can be studied scientifically, is not obvious and the concept of scientific investigation does not sit naturally with the uninitiated.

THE 'SCIENCE' IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

The next chapter of this book is about science. One cannot understand social science without some understanding of science as an activity different from other activities. People tend to confuse engineering with science. Both are important endeavours, but they are not the same. It is easier to visualise engineering than science. Engineering produces hardware and science produces understanding. The trappings of science, like white coats, microscopes and Bunsen burners can mistakenly come to epitomise the essence of science.

A popular phrase nowadays is 'rocket science'. But there is no such thing as rocket science. Physics and chemistry are sciences that contribute to the engineering of rockets, along with other natural sciences. Given the popular misconceptions about science, it is not surprising that using the term social science does not seem natural. The phrase social science does not appear to refer to something that is the same as natural science, according to popular criteria. Where is the equipment, the impressive display? Where is the success that we attach to science? What does social science have in common with the atom bomb or the double helix?

It all depends on what you think of as being essential to science. Is it experiments? Is it the discovery of laws? These are big questions, and in the next chapter they are addressed. My answer is that neither equipment nor success goes to the essence of science. The objective is what is crucial, and that objective is understanding. A science is a connected body of concepts, facts and explanations. As we shall see, this feature of connected ideas is crucial to scientific understanding, in contrast to other types of understanding. This is true of social science and of natural science.

Of course there are differences between sciences. There are differences between anthropology and physics, between biology and political science, between chemistry and sociology. As a group the social sciences differ in emphasis from the natural sciences. For example some sciences, both natural and social, rely more on controlled experiment than others do. On the whole, social science uses less controlled experiment than natural science. The natural sciences, too, differ from one another in the way they

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