

Chapter Three

VALID AND INVALID ALTERNATIVES TO SOCIAL SCIENCE

Some people have a talent for discerning that certain things which appear to be dissimilar are in fact similar or even the same. Other people emphasise the opposite side of the coin and take pride in showing that certain things which are often taken to be the same are in fact different. Both can be valuable discoveries. Usually the most appropriate and realistic stance is to note that certain methods, or disciplines, or subjects, which is what we are discussing now, are similar in some respects and different in others. The fact that things have much in common does not make them the same. The differences may be very important for some purposes.

ART

We can all agree that scientific understanding of society is not the only kind of understanding. A concrete example is useful in comparing the understanding that can come from literature with that of social science. Economics, sociology and political science all study the Great Depression. Each subject comes at the topic from a different perspective, and each has the goal of explaining different aspects of this social event. These social sciences are not directly concerned with creating for the reader the subjective experience of being an unemployed urban worker, or a hopelessly indebted farmer, or showing the reader what it was like to be any other participant in the depression.

The novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, in sharp contrast to social science, does have the goal of providing a picture of what it was like to be there. That is

very different from the economics monograph *The Great Crash*, which attempts to explain how this depression came about. I have no problem with calling "what it was like to be there" a kind of knowledge, and "why it came about" another kind of knowledge. I do have a problem with the claim, if it were to be made, that they are the same. Art is a wonderful vehicle for creating in the person who absorbs the art the emotions and feelings of various experiences. It is not particularly suited to explaining the causes of the events described. Social science does not have the goal of reproducing experiences. It has the goal of explaining things. Art is not social science. It is a perfectly valid alternative mode of understanding.

Of course, the subjective experiences people have often play a crucial role in understanding social events. Whether people perceive something as hard luck or unfair, permanent or possible to change, frightening or terrifying, and so on, may for many problems be important data for social scientists. The skills of the artist may be very similar to those of the scientific investigator. Anthropologists specialise in understanding what the world looks like from the inside of various communities. So do some film makers and novelists.

Taxi Driver and *Glamorama* put you in the shoes of certain characters who one feels one can recognise and know that in some sense they are not pure invention. The artists have given us insight into significant ways of living and feeling that are present in the world. There is some generality here. It is not just these particular characters who engage our attention. They are socially significant. That is as far as the artist need go. What it means to be "socially significant" does not have to be directly explored in a work of art. It does have to be in a work of social science — significant to whom, and in what way, and with what consequences.

The important differences between art and science as ways of approaching society have to do with generality and accuracy, with the audiences both engage, and with relations between works of art compared to the relations between works of science. *Crime and Punishment* and *The Stranger* are novels with something in common and they are helpful in illustrating all three differences. In both novels the reader gains insight into the experience of being particular people caught up in a particular murder. Novels are not usually about murders, or businessmen, or workers, in general, but are about particular people and particular events.

When prisoners on Death Row are taken to the electric chair in the novel *The Green Mile*, we are there with both the condemned men and the prison guards who have to carry out this awful task. Different prisoners and different guards would result in a different novel. This is especially true of the narrator in the novel. For many novels the character and humanity of the explicit or implicit storyteller is the basic content of the novel. We would

get a different answer to the implied question, what is the death sentence like, for example, with a different author, or the same author writing about different characters.

When we say that "art provides the experience of being there", it is worth asking exactly what do we mean? Are we referring to what it is like to be those particular characters, or the reader somehow in those characters, or the experience in general? I would suggest that all three are involved, with varying degrees of emphasis in particular plays, novels, films or whatever. The novel *American Psycho* is an interesting example. Taken as a simulation for the reader of the experience of being a trader in financial markets in New York City, it tells the tale through an extreme character who is hardly characterised at all. This tends to heighten what the author takes to be the significant and hidden, or repressed, features of a certain slice of contemporary life.

It can be argued that authors, and other artists, make general statements through the particular. For the most part, these are implicit statements. The act of showing what it is like to get married, commit a crime, work in a certain trade, go to war, or suffer some humiliation, is bound to involve some kind of implicit theory. Part of the task of literary criticism is to attempt to make explicit the implicit theories of works of art. Science is explicit. We may disagree about the significance and accuracy of a scientific theory. What the theory is saying is usually not a matter for dispute. It can also be argued that works of art not only have lots of meanings, the richness of a work of art may lie precisely in its breadth of meaning. *The Stranger* may mean something rather different to you than to me. Which is the 'true' meaning is not a helpful question. Scientific theories do not mean different things to different people. Scientific work addresses itself to that structure which is science. In that sense it has a single audience, personified by science specialists. Art is addressed to all mankind. The ability it has to mean different things to different people is a strength. In science the lack of a clear and unambiguous meaning is a weakness.

We learn from art, or perhaps better, enrich our lives through art, in much the same way as we learn from experience. The virtual experience which art provides is not real, but it may go to more significant layers of a subjective event than much of ordinary life. It is less real, in the ordinary sense, but often it is more focused. One can relate to experiences in a work of art which are totally remote from one's own life. Few of us have been outside a space vehicle in orbit to undertake repair work on it. Yet we can know something of it through imagination and having gone through fear, loneliness and demanding work in other contexts. It is reality passed to us through the mind and emotions of another person. That other person, the artist, may bring more to our experience than we often do ourselves, or at

least something very different and valuable. Even familiar experiences portrayed in a work of art may be more telling than much of what life itself often provides for us. Art works both with the familiar and the unfamiliar. Apart from its capacity for generating an experience which we may be unlikely to have in real life, we get an appreciation of the events told and expressed in the novel which we are incapable of having without the benefit of the guide, who is the artist.

THE BASIC DISTINCTION BETWEEN ART AND SCIENCE

But now we come to a crucial distinction between art and science. A new theory in science has to deal fully and explicitly with existing theory. The significance of the scientific idea lies in its relation to the current body of science. A work of art has a very different relation with other art. There is no sense in which *The Stranger* has the goal of improving on *Crime and Punishment*. New works of art generally do not replace or refine existing works. There is no question of the two novels offering rival views, only one of which may be right. Artists differ greatly in the extent to which they inform themselves of the history of their art. They may be aware of other work and be responding to it, but that response may or may not be apparent to the people who read the novel or come to the play. Each artist is working on her own project. In sharp contrast to the arts, scientists work on the same project.

It has been pointed out many times that if a particular scientist had not produced a certain piece of work, another scientist eventually would have done so. It is inconceivable that the nature of the genetic code would have remained unknown without Crick and Watson, or that biologists would not have a theory of natural selection if Darwin had not provided it. Indeed, in both cases, historians of science report on a race to reach certain discoveries and theories. Sometimes scientists are well aware that others are trying to solve the problem they are trying to solve, and they know who these competitors are. The reason for this that scientists all work on parts of the same structure of ideas. A gap or incongruity can be seen by all scientists. While artists certainly influence each other, the influence is not so direct because they are not working on the same thing in quite the same way that scientists address the same problem. Beckett does not replace Shakespeare. We cannot maintain that Faulkner was right and Vidal was wrong. We certainly can have different preferences. We may rank their achievements differently. But they and their works are in no sense obliged to deal with each other in the way that scientists and their work deal with one another.

Rival, or contradictory, scientific theories may co-exist for a time, or even a long time, because scientists have not figured out a way of resolving the conflict. It may be difficult to find implications of the two ideas which are different and which can be subjected to empirical investigation. But if this can be accomplished, this is a classic route for resolving conflict. Sometimes deeper logical investigation accomplishes the same task. Works of art are not rivals in the same sense. We need not compare them at all. We certainly do not have to say if one is true and another false. If I report that I went to see a new play last night, it would be odd for you to ask me whether it was true or false. You might want to know how much I enjoyed it. If you are a particularly serious chap, or lady, you might be interested in whether it moved me, and in what way. Did it give me a new insight into love or boredom? It may be very informative. Maybe I never thought about psychoanalysis, or AIDS, that way before. But works of art do not link up in the same way that scientific work links up. Works of art compete for our attention and appreciation. Scientists try to extend and improve explanations.

HISTORY

Though there are those who contest the view that art is different from social science, many other people feel that the point hardly needs to be made, and pointing out the differences between the two activities is pretty easy stuff; shooting fish in a barrel, as they say in America. When it comes to social science and history, the border between them is much fuzzier, and it is no easy matter to delineate it. The first point to dispose of is the idea that history is about the past of mankind, and social science is about the present. Of course much of the work of social scientists is applied work on current problems, or more basic work which is suggested by current problems, or simply takes off from current events. There are practical reasons why it is easier, as well as potentially more useful, to work on present day material, or fairly recent material, and these include data availability and the possibility of making all kinds of observations, including undertaking surveys. We may be able to ask some pertinent questions of those people who participated in removing the Berlin Wall, but we cannot question participants in the French Revolution. However, these practical considerations do not rule out doing social scientific investigation on any period that contained a society. Certain commonly employed methods will be impossible to use, but others will still be available.

It is also possible to write a history of any period, including right up to the present. My ignorance precludes me from giving specific examples, but



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