

PHILOSOPHIES OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Piet Strydom

Department of Sociology, University College Cork, Ireland

Keywords: Cognitivism, constructivism, critical realism, critical theory, deconstructionism, feminism, functionalism, hermeneutics, interpretativism, phenomenology, positivism, post-empiricism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, pragmatism, rational choice, structuralism, transcendental-pragmatics

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Vicissitudes of the Philosophy of Social Science
 3. Basic Cognitive Paradigms
 4. Contemporary Philosophies of Social Science
 5. Conclusion
- Acknowledgement
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

This chapter aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the philosophy of the social sciences or, rather, since there is no single generally accepted philosophy, the most important philosophies. This pluralism is made intelligible by first taking a historical perspective to clarify the emergence and interaction of different philosophies in the course of four developmental phases marked by important controversies. Then the focus shifts to the most important contemporary philosophies, each of which is outlined, assessed and probed for their latest advances and relevance.

1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant is the fountainhead of the philosophy of science of which the philosophy of social science is a branch. It is safe to say that systematic philosophical reflection on what the Scottish moral philosophers called ‘moral sciences’ and Condorcet some years later ‘social sciences’ took off in all earnest in the nineteenth century after Napoleon, who favored the natural sciences, had been deposed. August Comte was the one who inaugurated such reflection.

A historical perspective on the philosophy of social science from the vantage point of the present reveals that it has three major sources and directions and that it has thus far passed through four phases of development. In each phase, a series of controversies involving contestation and conflict among different directions marks out its course and punctuates the emergence of distinct philosophies. To gain a comprehensive grasp of the philosophy of social science, therefore, one has to keep the three directions in mind, consider the interaction and contestation among them in the course of time, and be

sensitive to the internal differentiation and extrapolation of each of the basic directions.

1.1. Sources and directions

The philosophy of social science’s principal sources of inspiration, which are at bottom responsible for its internal diversity and plurality, are intimately connected with momentous historical events of the Renaissance period – viz. the sixteenth-century Reformation, the mid-seventeenth-century institutionalization of modern science, and finally the eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement against absolutism. From these events run three major intertwined developments carrying the major directions of the discipline: hermeneutics, science and critique (see Table 1).

Period	Historical Source	Direction
Renaissance	institutionalization of science	science/positivist
	Reformation	hermeneutics
	Enlightenment	critique

Table 1: Historical Sources and Directions of the Philosophy of Social Science

1.1.1. Hermeneutics

During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, a battle was fought over the interpretation of the Bible and in this context hermeneutics, or the ancient-medieval doctrine of interpretation extended by the Humanists’ philological method, was revitalized. It provided a basis not only for the seventeenth and eighteenth-century concern with interpretation, particularly Giambattista Vico’s defense of interpretation against the emerging scientific method, but also for the nineteenth-century formalization of hermeneutics as a human scientific method by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gustav Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey, and its twentieth-century broadening by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. This broadening in turn depended on Edmund Husserl’s introduction of phenomenology and Heidegger’s subsequent forging of hermeneutic-phenomenology. Along the way, this interpretative tradition would impact significantly on leading European and American social scientists and philosophers such as Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, Karl Mannheim, Alfred Schutz, Ludwig Wittgenstein and, still later, Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas as well as on the late twentieth-century ‘interpretative turn’ in the Anglo-American and French humanities and social sciences, led by Peter Winch, William Dray, Charles Taylor, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty.

1.1.2. Science

In the wake of Galileo’s successful mathematization of nature and the subsequent institutionalization of modern science in the Royal Society and the *Académie des Sciences* in 1662 and 1666 respectively, the scientific method became consolidated and confirmed through Isaac Newton’s work and a series of scientific revolutions in physics, chemistry and biology. Inspired by Enlightenment philosophers like David Hume in Scotland and Condillac and Condorcet in France, and under the impression of the prestige and spectacular achievements of the natural sciences, authors such as Henri de

Saint-Simon, particularly August Comte who coined the phrase, and his followers John Stuart Mill and Émile Durkheim formulated the 'positivist' doctrine. Via the critical positivism of Ernst Mach, this doctrine would be carried forward in modified form during the first part of the twentieth century by the 'neo-positivism' promoted by the Vienna Circle. From its inception, through its explicit formulation, to its efflorescence, however, positivism was accompanied by an undercurrent of criticism from closely related historicist (William Whewell), pragmatist (Charles S Peirce), conventionalist (Henri Poincaré) and realist (Émile Meyerson) perspectives. Due to both internal tensions fed especially by Wittgenstein's later language philosophy and external criticisms from interpretative and critical viewpoints, positivism broke down between the 1950s and 1970s to make way for 'post-positivism' or 'post-empiricism'. In this context, not only the historicist, pragmatist, conventionalist and realist tendencies were able to assert themselves, but also the long marginalized social scientific interpretative and critical traditions. The demise of positivism's hegemonic position and authority in the wake of the interpretative turn and the consequent emergence of a situation of philosophical pluralism undoubtedly represents the most crucial event in the history of the philosophy of social science, particularly for an understanding of the contemporary state-of-the-art.

1.1.3. Critique

The aforementioned concerns with interpretation and especially science were also present in the Enlightenment, but most characteristic from the perspective of the philosophy of the social sciences was its doctrine of critique. During his exile in Holland where he also met John Locke, the Frenchman Pierre Bayle gave critique its first coherent formulation in the late seventeenth century. Subsequently, the French Enlightenment thinkers Montesquieu, Voltaire and Diderot broadened it into socio-institutional and political critique which was adopted in more conservative form by Adam Ferguson and John Millar, the first real sociologists of the Scottish Enlightenment. While mediated by Kant's three 'Critiques' (*Critique of Pure Reason* 1781, *Critique of Practical Reason* 1788, and *Critique of Judgement* 1790), the mature Enlightenment conception of critique was central to Karl Marx's (1818-83) thought from his doctoral thesis to his main work, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867). Having been present in a subterranean way in a series of nineteenth-century controversies, it is this idea that was taken up and elaborated in the twentieth century first by George Lukács and then very influentially by such representatives of the Frankfurt School as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and, later, Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. In the wake of the popularization and internationalization of critical theory since the 1960s, with different versions of critical social science appearing in France (Pierre Bourdieu), Britain (Tom Bottomore, Anthony Giddens, Roy Bhaskar) and the United States (Nancy Fraser, Douglas Kellner, Craig Calhoun), Axel Honneth has since the 1990s revitalized the unique German critical tradition originally inspired by the Young or left-Hegelian heritage, thus complementing the Habermasian line.

1.2. Phases and controversies

Thus far, the unfolding of the history of the philosophy of social science has passed

through four distinct phases of development. The first phase, which involved the establishment of the three broad directions, took off around 1840 and came to an end with the outbreak of World War I. The second phase during which these different directions became consolidated started directly after the war and continued until the early 1950s. That same decade saw the opening of the third phase which culminated in the significant transformative events of the 1960s and came to a close in the next decade. The beginning of the fourth and still current phase can be traced back to the late 1970s that were succeeded by two decades of new departures which stretch into the twenty-first century.

In each phase, it is possible to identify not only the three above-mentioned directions, but more importantly also their interactions and contestations in controversies in which reflection on the nature of social science became highly visible (see Table 2). These discursive events provide the context within which the established directions interrelate, the central philosophical issues are highlighted, new departures are spawned and from which distinct positions or philosophies emerge. Consideration of these controversies is therefore essential if one is to gain proper access to the philosophy of social science and to develop an adequate grasp of its history, the perennial issues at stake in it, and its current state.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
1840-1914	1920s-1950s	1950-1970s	1970s-2000s
1 Haym-Twesten 2 <i>Methodenstreit</i> (Explanation-Understanding 1) 3 <i>Werturteilstreit</i> 4 Pragmatist-Interpretativist	5 Sociology of knowledge 6 Explanation-Understanding 2 7 Methodological individualist 1	8 Functionalist 1 9 Methodological individualist 2 10 Explanation-Understanding 3 i) Rationality ii) Popper-Kuhn iii) Positivist iv) Habermas-Gadamer 11 Structuralist 12 Habermas-Luhmann	13 Constructivist-Realist 14 Deconstructionist 15 Functionalist 2 16 Feminist 17 Pragmatist 18 Critical theory 19 Rational choice 20 Cognitivist 21 Naturalist 22 Infra-individualist 23 Public sociology

Table 2: Major Phases and Controversies

An initial overview of the development of the philosophy of social science can be obtained by bringing together a few basic pieces of information provided above.

Subsequent to the emergence of the science, hermeneutic and critical traditions in the early modern period, the science tradition in the form of positivism gained a dominant

position in the philosophy of social science, especially through the efforts of Comte and his followers. As a result, both the hermeneutic and critical traditions became marginalized, with the latter in addition suffering deliberate suppression. That these two traditions had not been fatally wounded, however, is borne out not only by the intermittent controversies in which they engaged against each other and especially against positivism, but also by their eventual emergence into the mainstream view in the 1960s. It is at this point that we witness a series of transformative controversies which led to the demise of the hegemony and authority of positivism, marked by the interpretative turn in the social sciences and the new post-empiricist situation. The decks having been cleared, the marginalized traditions reasserted themselves and a whole range of new departures characteristic of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries made their appearance. They built on the available presuppositions by selectively and innovatively extrapolating, refining and combining elements from the three basic directions (see Table 3).

1840	1850	1900	1950	1960s	2000
			breakdown		
Dominant Positivist Tradition:	Old Positivism	Neo-Positivism		Post-Empiricism Interpretative turn Pluralism	Reconstituted Science Tradition
Marginalized Interpretative Tradition:	Hermeneutics	Phenomenology	Language Philosophy		Resurgent Interpretative Tradition
Marginalized Critical Tradition:	Marx	Lukács	Frankfurt School		Resurgent Critical Tradition
					New Departures: Realism Constructivism Deconstructivism Functionalism Feminism Pragmatism Critical Theory Rational Choice Cognitivism

Table 3: Timeline of the Philosophy of Social Science

Having established an anticipatory overview of the philosophy of social science, we now have a foil against which to present a more detailed account in the following paragraphs. Sections 2 and 3 are respectively devoted to the emergence of the most important philosophies of the social sciences in the context of the major phases and controversies, and to the formal outcome of these developments. In section 4, it then becomes possible to focus in particular on the leading contemporary philosophies.

2. Vicissitudes of the Philosophy of Social Science

2.1. First phase: 1840-1914

Since the late eighteenth century, impulses from the above-mentioned sources continued to feed into the social sciences and philosophical reflection upon them. In the first phase, therefore, we witness the emergence of three relatively distinct philosophies of social science. The first one, which was strongly influenced by natural science, took the form of classical positivism as represented by Comte, J. S. Mill and Durkheim, among others. The second one, which stemmed from the Enlightenment and German idealism, left-Hegelianism in particular, was represented by Marx who was by no means oblivious of the idea of science yet stressed critique. The third one, which adopted a historical, cultural or human scientific perspective, was represented by Droysen, Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert, who focused on understanding or interpretation in opposition to the natural scientific or classical positivist notion of explanation. This is the line on which Weber drew toward the close of this phase.

Philosophical reflection on the social sciences during the nineteenth century developed in dependence on the institutionalization of distinct disciplines in the context of the university revolution which started in Germany. History was the first to be established in 1810 in Berlin, followed by economics in 1870 in England, anthropology in 1892 in the United States and, after an abortive attempt in France between 1830 and 1850, sociology was eventually set up as an independent and recognized discipline in 1892 in the United States, 1913 in France and 1918 in the German-speaking world. Typically, these events were accompanied by controversies in which competing philosophical justifications for social science were played out against one another. The scene for these debates, however, was set by the dominant natural scientific perspective which helped the positivistic philosophy to gain the upper-hand in the social sciences. Its adversaries were thus compelled to more or less share some of its assumptions. Politically speaking, the broadly liberal hegemony exercised by capitalism and the state together which underpinned the positivist tradition subordinated both the conservative and romantic sources on which the interpretative tradition drew as well as the radical socialist and especially left-Hegelian ones to which the critical tradition appealed.

The first controversy to erupt once Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1840-42) and Mill's *System of Logic* (1843) had secured positivism is the dispute of the late 1850s between Rudolph Haym, a left-Hegelian critic, and Karl Twisten, a liberal positivist. It was the watershed that cleared the way for the important historicist-positivist controversy which brought the interpretative philosophy to the fore in opposition to positivism. The latter controversy passed through several phases. It was initiated by Droysen in 1858 with his proposal for an interpretative or 'understanding' by contrast to an 'explanatory' history. Then it was decisively amplified and generalized in 1883 by two contributions: Dilthey's founding of the '*Geisteswissenschaften*' on the methodology of hermeneutic understanding in opposition to the explanatory natural sciences, and Gustav Schmoller's justification of economics as a historical-descriptive discipline rather than a realist-empirical one focusing on exact laws. In the 1890s, finally, it bloomed into a full-scale epistemological-methodological dispute, the so-called '*Methodenstreit*', which continued to rage until the outbreak of World War I. It

can be regarded as the first explanation-understanding controversy. The propensity of both conservatives and radicals to bring values into play in social science, the former religious and the latter political considerations, gave rise to a secondary strain of this controversy, the so-called '*Werturteilstreit*' or value judgment dispute of the years 1909 to 1914.

Weber's methodological writings which were aimed at establishing a conception of social science able to mediate between positivism and intuitionism, or explanation and understanding, and at resolving the issue of values in social scientific practice, are usually regarded as the culmination point of the first phase in the development of the philosophy of social science. In broader perspective, however, it is clear that the *Methodenstreit* in Germany generated resonances and could count on fruitful contact points abroad, especially in the United States. The complex relations among neo-Kantianism, hermeneutics, left-Hegelianism and the philosophy of life, on the one hand, and Peirce and William James' pragmatism and George Herbert Mead's related interactionist social psychology, on the other, were central to what Habermas has called 'the overwhelmingly productive American-German encounter' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – what could perhaps be called the pragmatist-interpretative debate. Without this discursive event, like the other controversies, the subsequent development of the philosophy of social science cannot be adequately understood.

2.2. Second phase: 1920s-early 1950s

Although positivism strengthened its hegemonic hold in the post-World War I period by transforming itself into neo-positivism, all three basic strands of the philosophy of social science nevertheless maintained their presence during the second phase. The critical tradition received a revitalizing boost through the formal establishment of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Due to its intensifying conflict with positivism, however, the interpretative tradition enjoyed a greater degree of visibility than the critical tradition from a mainstream perspective. Simultaneously, several nuances were introduced through the more or less subtle extrapolation, internal differentiation and elaboration of the three traditions. As in the previous case, various controversies provide windows on the development of this phase.

In the light of several developments around the turn of the century, it became apparent in the early twentieth century just how problematic and limited nineteenth-century positivism actually was. Of particular importance were the logical analyses of such authors as Gottlob Frege, Charles Peirce, Husserl, G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, which questioned psychologism in favor of stressing the role of language. By the 1920s, these perceptions consolidated into a new program which was given formulation under the title of neo-positivism. It was promoted by the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers in Austria and Germany who emigrated to Britain and the United States under pressure of the Nazi rise to power and thus gave positivism wide currency in the English-speaking world. Major social scientifically relevant representatives included Wittgenstein, Ernst Nagel, Carl Hempel and Karl Popper. Due to the general perception of the importance of language in knowledge production, which classical positivism ignored, neo-positivism's internal development from 'logical atomism' through 'logical positivism' to 'ordinary language analysis', which spelled the demise of positivism by

the 1950s and 1960s, followed the elaboration of the philosophy of language.

In the post-WWI period, a pragmatist philosophy of social science came into its own. This was made possible by Peirce and James's founding of pragmatism as well as John Dewey and Mead's transferal of it to the social sciences. Although, like positivism, it also sprang from the science tradition, it quite sharply differed from the former due to Peirce's left-Hegelian emphasis on world-creation through intelligent action. The interactionist quality of pragmatism, particularly well articulated by Mead, owes something to the productive exchange between American pragmatism and the German interpretative tradition as represented by Dilthey and Simmel. Over and above the conservatism of the latter tradition, however, Mead's position was typically pragmatist in so far as he maintained the link between cognition and action, theory and practice, and knowledge and ethics. The interpretative philosophy of social science underpinning the later symbolic interactionist movement is heavily indebted to Mead, but it dropped the general pragmatist concern with evolution, influenced by Charles Darwin, and thus the material substrate of communication. In this respect, the important interactionist contribution of Jean Piaget, who worked as a sociologist for almost twenty years before gaining fame as a cognitive psychologist, is in a sense closer to the original pragmatist philosophy of social science than is symbolic interactionism.

Another development of the 1920s from within the science tradition, particularly psychology, and hence related to positivism was John B. Watson's behaviorism. It was so compelling that Mead felt obliged to present his own position as 'social behaviorist', but with this decisive difference that he insisted that it was not sufficient to take the external manifestations of social acts and interaction or communication into account. Characteristically, he argued that mind or the inner phase of such processes cannot and should not be excluded. In the late 1930's, Burrhus F. Skinner cast behaviorism in a form that for some decades to come proved extremely influential in American social science in particular.

The perception of Weber's contribution as a seminal achievement was reinforced by the posthumous publication of his methodological essays in 1922. Although he had sought to mediate between and thus to give recognition to both understanding and explanation, his program for a so-called 'understanding sociology' (*'verstehende Soziologie'*) contributed to the continuation and even intensification of the competition between the interpretative tradition and positivism. It proved to be an important starting point for the second explanation-understanding controversy which tentatively started in the late 1920s and then flared up in particular between the 1940s and 1950s. Karl Mannheim based his program for the 'sociology of knowledge' on an interpretative philosophy, partly inspired by Weber, which he played out against the natural sciences. Alfred Schütz's very influential phenomenological buttressing of Weber's interpretative sociology in the early 1930s provided the basis not only for a spectacular advancement of the interpretative tradition, but also for a conflict with positivists such as Hempel and Nagel as well as with Talcott Parsons, the leading functionalist who methodologically nevertheless shared some basic positivist assumptions.

The 1920s also saw the institutionalization of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Philosophically, Georg Lukács prepared the way for it in the immediate post-WWI

period when he broke with Weber and interpretative social science in favor of a Hegelian-Marxist philosophy, what may be called a standpoint epistemology, which gave priority to the working class viewpoint in the production of social scientific knowledge. The Frankfurt School's first object of systematic critique was the sociology of knowledge. Horkheimer, Marcuse and others' concerted attack against Mannheim's relativism gave rise to the wide-ranging sociology of knowledge dispute of the late 1920s and 1930s, which unmistakably demonstrated their collective commitment to a normatively-pregnant critical position. Upon becoming director in 1930, Horkheimer produced a series of tradition-defining essays outlining the Institute's program in which he relentlessly exposed the epistemological, ontological, methodological and practical limits of the conventional conceptions of social science of the time. 'Critical theory' as 'interdisciplinary materialism' was sharply contrasted with 'traditional theory' which included not only positivism but also the idea of social science as cultural science, particularly interpretative social science, irrespective of whether based on neo-Kantianism, hermeneutics or phenomenology. Through the 1930s, this strategic intervention was supported and reinforced by a second series of articles on the relation of critical theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis penned by prominent members of the School, including Adorno, Marcuse and Erich Fromm.

Another trend that emerged during the interwar period is functionalism. It stemmed from the anthropological analysis of particular cultures (Richard Thurnwald, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Ralph Linton) and the sociological analysis of social and cultural structures (Durkheim), and became consolidated between the late 1930s and early 1950s in conjunction with general systems theory. While built on certain neo-positivistic assumptions defended by Ernst Nagel and Richard Rudner, the system theoretical 'structural-functionalism' of Parsons, and to a lesser degree of Robert K. Merton's, became the paradigmatic example of social scientific functionalism by the mid-twentieth century. It made available a starting point for one of the major controversies at the outset of the next phase in the development of the philosophy of social science.

The second phase also witnessed the first shots in the protracted debate about methodological individualism which would come into its own in the next phase.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 31 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

Bibliography

Apel, K.-O. (1984). *Understanding and Explanation*, 293pp., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [A wide-ranging transcendental-pragmatic account of a pluralistic philosophy of social science in which pride of place is given to critical social science].

Benton, T. and Craib, I. (2001). *Philosophy of Social Science*, 203pp., London: Palgrave. [A general survey of the philosophy of social science].

Bohman, J. (1991). *New Philosophy of Social Science*, 273pp., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [A consideration of new developments in response to problems of indeterminacy].

Delanty, G. (2005). *Social Science*, 197 pp. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. [A comprehensive overview of the philosophical foundations of the social sciences].

Delanty, G. and Strydom, P. (2003). *Philosophies of Social Science*, 481 pp. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. [A wide-ranging collection of classical and contemporary readings accompanied by helpful introductory materials].

Danermark, B., Jakobsen, L. and Karlsson, J. C. (2002). *Explaining Society*, 221 pp. London: Routledge. [A presentation of critical realism in comparison and contrast with competing philosophies].

Fuller, S. (2000). *Thomas Kuhn*, 472 pp. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [A wide-ranging, both historically and systematically informative, critical analysis of the transformation of the social sciences in the late twentieth century].

Gulbenkian Commission (1996). *Open the Social Sciences*, 105 pp. Stanford: Stanford University Press. [An insightful analysis of the transformed situation of the social sciences and the challenges they face].

Habermas, J. (1988). *On the Logic of the Social Science*, 220 pp. Cambridge: Polity Press. [A classical, comprehensive and incisive analysis of philosophies of the social sciences].

Outhwaite, W. (1987). *New Philosophies of Social Science*, 137 pp. London: Macmillan. [A comparison and contrast of realism, hermeneutics and critical theory].

Biographical Sketch

Piet Strydom, an Apartheid émigré, is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at University College Cork, Ireland. He has published particularly on social theory and the history and philosophy of social science. Major publications include *Discourse and Knowledge* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), *Risk, Environment and Society* (Open University Press, 2002), and *Philosophies of Social Science* (Open University Press, 2003) edited and introduced with Gerard Delanty. Most recently, he edited *European Journal of Social Theory* 10(3), August 2007, a special issue on 'Social Theory after the Cognitive Revolution: Varieties of Contemporary Cognitive Sociology'.