Bernard Crick on The American Science of Politics: APSA Panel [*]

I had forgotten what a good book Bernard Crick had written. Published in 1959, the same year as C. Wright Mills's *Sociological Imagination*, a book with which it has much in common, it remains a valuable resource. Crick and Mills attacked the prevailing positivism within social science; both called for a recovery of history, both were mildly optimistic: As Crick wrote:

> The time may be near, as a growing body of criticism like Barrington Moore illustrates, when American political scientists will be able to offer some general understanding of American politics. This will not be because a Foundation will subsidize another team of scholars to write another report on the state of contemporary political science, but because there is a growing need for self-understanding due to the profoundly changed context of American life (p. 232).

Well, of course, things got worse, not better. Parson's functionalism--betrayed in Crick's hopes that a need will provoke the right solution-- accommodated the "abstracted empiricists" and literally took over as the framework for both mainstream political science and sociology. Whatever concreteness had remained in some of the empirical studies which Crick found salutary, gave way to a pseudo-universalism in which American politics and society became exemplars of all that was good and true. "Modernization theory"--generously funded by the US state--was, of course, the cutting edge. No wonder, so-called "postmodernists" (equally disabused by the positivism of 2nd International Marxism) abandoned all hope for a general understanding of anything.

I am in general agreement with the main thrust of *The American Science of Politics*, but will, in keeping with the larger goals of this panel, use this very fine book as a point to departure to raise questions about the problems of doing a history of political science, issues which are both complicated and contestable. By using Professor Crick's book, I can keep my comments both focused and more or less concrete.

As his title says, academic political science (underlying the word "science") is an American invention. This is just right, usually ignored, and extremely important. But it raises the question: why the US at just that time in history? This seems to be his main argument:

> The force of the idea of a science of politics...is not to be understood in terms of a perversion of scientific reasoning, which has an integrity of its own, but as a caricature of American liberal democracy, a growth upon it, when it loses touch, by scorning history and philosophy, with its roots: the Protestantism of conscience against mere power (p. 227).

My objection is not that these are high abstractions, since they are offered, I take it, as a summary of the complicated process which led to the outcome. I have three problems:

First, American liberal democracy is surely implicated, but on my view, it was no caricature on which it grew. Let me quote Professor Crick against himself:

> Right from the founding of the new Republic there were good reasons why the study of politics should grow into a distinct, large and powerful academic discipline, something very different in both content and size from almost anything, then or now, in European education.

These "good reasons" seem to me to be quite essential to the character of the American Republic, e.g., the way it redefined the very idea of democracy. But second, a good deal more than "American liberal democracy" was implicated in the outcome. This raises the question of what counts an explanation in either history or social science. For me, since social scientific explanations need to be historical, my answer applies to both.

In general, I think that to explain any sort of social phenomena one needs to take seriously Marx's dictum: People make history but not with materials of their own choosing. That is, decisions and actions are structured by prevailing practices and ideas, themselves the legacy of activities of persons in the past. In turn, this presupposes a theory of history and of society which I do not here attempt to flesh out. It would be essentially the one put forward by Anthony Giddens

and Roy Bhaskar, a view which undercuts the characteristic mainstream bifurcations of agency and structure and cultural and material practices.[1]

Crick takes, I think, a different stance. He concentrates on ideas, identifying what he takes to be the key promoters of the ideas he thinks "explains" the outcome: The American Founders, Spencer and Darwin, Lester Ward, Croly, Dewey, Bentley, Merriam, TV Smith, my old mentor at Syracuse University, and Lasswell. But he has precious little to say about institutions (structures) and how choices made by people with ideas were shaped and affected by them.

In particular, I do not think that you can explain the development of political science as a science in America unless one shows how problems and opportunities generated by the specific development of the post-war America political economy produced the American University and then how some of these same problems and opportunities led "social scientists" to invent social scientific disciplines.[2]

Very briefly, the American university was an entirely novel kind of institution. America lacked a feudal past but it did not lack "science" as a potential source of authority. When then faced with the gigantic new problems produced by immigration, industrialization and urbanization--race, poverty and class war- educational entrepreneurs could fill the gap left by a "weak state" and a strong "civil society." They could build universities, create departments of specialized expertise and then produce "scientific" and ameliorative solutions that were wholly consistent with "liberal democracy" as they understood it.

Disciplines, of course, are not natural kinds so that a critical part of the story will be how they got defined, how problems were set and how they were parsed. (Crick's few suggestions here regarding sociology and political science are at a very high level of abstraction and omit most of

the key players, e.g., Albion Small, at the critical juncture. The relation to history as a discipline is ignored, and the remarks as regards Merriam and those who followed him, on the relevance of psychology to the new political science simply assumes that psychology was a scientific discipline.) None of this was inevitable and it all took place in a arena of contestation; there were losers as well winners.

But in his treatment there is, as well, a lacunae as regards ideas, in particular the conception of science which was appropriated by the newly constructed disciplines of the social sciences. This, too, was contested.

Especially given that he was writing in the 1950s, Professor Crick does a good deal better than most on this score, yet there still some difficulites. Most crucially, he takes as unproblematic the conception of science that had been articulated by positivist theorists of science. He comments:

> R.G. Collingwood was surely right to see the essence of positivism as an extension of the philosophy of the natural sciences into all philosophy. There is only a small doubt that such a philosophy can provide us with an adequately epistemology for scientific truths; but there seems every reason for doubt that it can help us in framing social theories and evaluating social truths" (p. 221).

The assumption that a positivist theory of science accurately represents natural science seems at least to guide Crick's narrative, but this distorts his history. Even if advocates of a scientific political science took positivism for granted, we need to ask whether there were alternatives and if there were, why they were not sustained.

Crick suggests that pragmatism was an anti-positivist alternative--at least for social science-- which did succumb to positivism. Here again Crick is so much better than most: Most writers, including most recently Dorothy Ross in her well-received, *The Origins of American Social Science* (1991), have no problem here because, for them, pragmatism *was* a positivism.

Crick writes:

> Pragmatism did try to give self-understanding to American society, but its vision was too narrow and its logic was too circular. It was powerless to protect itself against becoming immersed in the latent scientism of the culture; it was willing to criticize almost everything except the pride in technology and the absolute faith in progress which became called 'scientific method'. (p. 232).

I would agree with Crick that it was "powerless to protect itself," and at least part of the reason for this was its "pride in technology" and "faith in progress which became called 'scientific method.' But I do not think an appeal to a "latent scientism" in the culture will suffice nor that if we talking about Dewey, the vision of pragmatism was too narrow nor its logic circular. Unpacking the causes of "latent scientism"--if there be such--will itself be a big job, but I suspect that, as above, it will be related to the absence of a feudal past in the US.

And, while I cannot develop this here, Crick, along with most writers surely misunderstands Dewey. He writes, for example, that "Merriam had taken from Dewey a sharp epistemological distinction between 'fact' and 'value' (p. 158). But one of the most dominant themes of Dewey's instrumentalism is precisely to reject such an epistemological distinction. Dewey was hardly sanguine over the prospects of scientific method as he uniquely understood this, as his deeply critical and pessimistic *Public and Its Problems* (1927) shows. Indeed, I would argue that a crucial reason that Dewey's pragmatism was "powerless to protect itself" was its radical implications, both as regards the nature of a social science and its relations to democracy, a theme recognized by Crick, but not developed.

For example, after devastating the assumption, urged by Lippmann that "enlightened directing minds" had been "slow to call in the social scientist" as expert, Dewey insisted that "the prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight that does

not exist" (p. 339). Moreover, Dewey understood full well why the public was "lost," "bewildered" and "eclipsed": "In a word, the new forms of combined action due to the modern economic regime controls present policies, much as dynastic interests controlled those of two centuries ago" (p. 373). Indeed, mainstream stream social science was--and is-- a full partner insofar as, without intention, it disallowed the kind of knowledge and insight that was a prime condition of a democratically organized public. Dewey did provide, I would insist, an alternative for social science, but I do not think that anyone, including here perhaps surprisingly, the most recent work on Dewey, including the well-received account of Alan Ryan, has even a glimmer of this.

Crick's book, of course, was pre-Kuhn and he might very well now argue that his "small doubts" as regards the epistemological usefulness of positivism have become quite immense. But today, our response should be neither the one typical of post-modernist writers, to argue that "scientific truth" is not available, nor is it to argue (e,g., as does Crick and Dorothy Ross) that there is a radical asymmetry between the epistemology and strategies of research between the social and the natural sciences. Since there is no escaping judgments about the beliefs of actors, I do not think that one can do a history of a science unless one has a philosophy of science. But if are to have a plausible theory of science, we need to look again at the practices of the successful sciences.

I would offer a critical realist epistemology (as put forward by Harré, Bhaskar, Isaac and others).[3] It gives us a convincing and deeper criticism of what are, sadly, the still prevailing positivist assumptions about the practices of the sciences. On this view, it can be seen that the positivist articulation of the modern disciplines of the social sciences are part of a structure of

ideology in that they trivialize inquiry, rationalize present practices, and disallow precisely what Veblen and Dewey called for: "inquiry into the nature and causes, the working and outcome, of [the] institutional apparatus" (Veblen, 1957: 132).

On a realist theory of science, we have good reasons to do histories of social science: We can begin to understand how it was possible that we uncritically but actively participate in sustaining ignorance and mystification, how, indeed, while social science should be part of the solution, it is a large part of the problem.

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[1] See Gidden's *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[2] See my *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (1987).

[3] To summarize: As Dewey and Crick would agree, there is "a common logic" of verification but it is not either Carnapian nor Popperian. Second, as Dewey did see, natural laws are not (as Comte well put it), "invariant relations of succession and resemblance," but are, as realist argue, powers which may be possessed unexercised, may be unrealized although exercised, and may be realized unperceived or undetected. Indeed, most scientific theory is precisely the effort to represent causal powers (gravitation e.g.), which if really existing, give us the ability to understand the observable outcomes everyday life and of scientific laboratories.