

A Realist Philosophy of Social Science: Explanation and Understanding
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Pre-Publication Reviews

'With this book Manicas has filled a major need in the philosophy of social science, which has not given adequate critical attention to the problem of explanation. His argument that understanding not explanation as such is the primary goal of the sciences entails a wider assessment of the philosophy of the social sciences. This is an original contribution as well as being an important and very convincing statement of realism. It is likely to become a key work in the field.'

Gerard Delanty, Professor of Sociology, University of Liverpool

'Despite their protestations to the contrary, scientists have always been influenced, often to the detriment of their projects, by philosophy. In this timely volume Peter Manicas offers a systematic defence of scientific realism as the philosophical framework for the social sciences. Parallel to the way the natural sciences propose explanations by causal mechanisms, the social sciences should propose their own form of 'causality', active agents making use of systems of meaningful actions to accomplish their ends. In his comprehensive study of how the social sciences might be, Manicas works out this insight in various contexts with powerful effect. One can only hope that, at last, the spectre of naïve empiricism will finally be exorcised from the social sciences.'

Horace R. Harré, Distinguished Research Professor, Georgetown University

'Neo-positivist, interpretive, and postmodernist social science are often seriously confused about fundamental issues of explanation, causation, interpretation, and understanding. Critical realism offers the best alternative account of the social scientific task and the most sensible resolution of our widespread confusions. Peter Manicas makes an important contribution to developing such a critical realist approach to social science that can help to re-orient our scholarly visions in smarter, more realistic, and fruitful directions.'

Christian Smith, Professor of Sociology, University of Notre Dame

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Introduction

This volume offers a reassessment of the problem of explanation in social science and does so from what remains a marginalized, realist perspective. But because the problem of explanation is central to inquiry in social science, the volume also provides a systematic philosophy of social science. It begins with the idea that the fundamental goal of theory in both the natural and social sciences is not, contrary to widespread opinion, prediction and control, or the explanation of events (including "behavior"). Rather, more modestly, theory (at least in one its clear senses) aims to provide an understanding of the processes which jointly produce the contingent outcomes of experience. We understand why the planets move in ellipses, why things burn, and why salt dissolves in water (if and when it does) when we have a physical theory which provides a causal mechanism. By providing the principles detailing the nature of molecules, the atomic structure of salt and water, the principles of their action, etc., we can understand combustion and solubility—and many, many other chemical processes. Indeed, for the most part, while the theoretical work of physical scientists often begins with the effort to understand patterns, they are not interested in, nor generally capable of, providing either "explanations" or "predictions" of particular events. For example, the trajectory of a boulder splintering as it rolls down a hill is fully understood in terms of physical principles, but neither the trajectory nor the final positions of the splintered parts can be explained or predicted. But an adequate understanding of the outcome is easily available. The foregoing does not seem either surprising or novel. But, for good historical reasons, reigning assumptions both in the philosophy of social science and in much current social scientific practice violate what thus seems commonsensical.

It seems hardly deniable that understanding natural processes, splintering, oxidizing, dissolving, fertilizing and dying requires understanding the causal mechanisms at work, physical, chemical, and biological, some available in direct experience, some not. No one will ever see a photon but they are among the important non-observables posited in a physical theory that gives us understanding of a very large range of phenomena. The argument thus joins "realist" criticisms of empiricist conceptions of theory and Humean notions of causality. Once this is in place, it is easy to see why fairly long-standing objections to both the dominant view of theory and the still dominant covering law model of explanation are fatal.

But by developing the ideas of "agents" as causes and of "social mechanisms" as agent-generated causal mechanisms, the book extends, in a novel way, the argument to the social sciences. Here we join old debates over so-called "methodological individualism," and the critical role of "hermeneutics," and, as provoked by Giddens, Bhaskar, Bourdieu and others, recent debates in the philosophy of social science regarding the ontology of society. Thus, the ontological status of "social structure" is clarified and resolved. Understanding in social science is achieved when, as in the physical sciences, we have a causal mechanism, but unlike the physical sciences, minded

persons working with "materials at hand" will be constitutive of social causal mechanisms.

Because the themes are inter-connected, the volume is an introduction to a philosophy or meta-theory for social science. Uncritically influenced by long outdated doctrines in the philosophy of science, the volume argues that, among many people, both philosophers and social scientists, there remains a widespread set of misconceptions regarding both the nature of the tasks and limits of social science. We need to understand that there are important differences between the scientific study of nature and the scientific study of society, but we need first to be clear about the nature and goals of science more generally. By drawing on and integrating recent developments in the philosophy of science, this volume aims to do this.

The structure of the argument is as follows: Chapter 1, "Explanation and Understanding," begins with a close examination of the so-called "Deductive-Nomological" (D-N) or "covering law" model of explanation. It is of considerable interest to note that while the critical literature of this model is now of long standing, and that while many writers, both in philosophy and the social sciences, have rejected the *epistemology* of empiricist ("positivist") theory of science, many of these same writers fail to see that a powerful alternative to the D-N model of explanation is available. Once it is shown that understanding is the primary goal of the sciences, the whole edifice of empiricist philosophy of science crumbles—from its metaphysically implausible event ontology, including its contra-empirical constant conjunction conception of causality, to its conception of theory. We show then that understanding requires appeal to causal mechanisms properly conceived as productive powers. The chapter provides both illustration and argument for these ideas.

Chapter 2, "Theory and Experiment and the Metaphysics of Laplace," argues against what is sometimes terms "deductivism," the idea that theories in the physical sciences can be fully expressed as a deductive system, with axioms and deductions there from. Rather, following the too often neglected work of Rom Harré (1970), it is argued that theories identify "things"—molecules and atoms, for example, how they are structured, and how they interact. Theories, of course, are representations, but they are meant to represent reality—as it is in-itself. We look then at anti-realist criticisms of this view of theory, provide an account of experiment as it actually functions in science, and we offer a post-positivist (post-Kuhnian) account of theory acceptance. The chapter concludes with a criticism of the La Placean metaphysics assumed by empiricist theories of science. In our world, most events, birth, growth, rain, fires, earthquakes, depressions, revolutions, are the product of a complex nexus of *causes of many different kinds*, conjunctively at work. Indeed, it is for this reason that the disciplines of the natural sciences, instead of seeking to explain concrete events, more modestly seek to understand the mechanisms and processes of nature. But this means that while everything is caused, there is radical contingency in both natural and human history. The implications of this are critical for a human science, as Chapter 3 shows.

On the basis of the foregoing account of science, Chapter 3, "Explanation and Understanding in the Social Sciences," offers a philosophy of social science, making clear the critical points of difference in the subject-matter of the natural and social world and the implications of this for inquiry. After setting out and rejecting (by way of summary) the key assumptions of the prevailing assumptions regarding science, an account of "persons" is developed. The view of causality already set out is critical. Once we notice that a host of causal mechanisms, biological, psychological, and social, are epigenetically implicated in the constitution of a human being—and of their concrete actions, we can see that "nature" and "nurture" are inextricably involved and that in consequence, there is no reason to believe that any science, psychological or social, could improve on the way we ordinarily explain and predict behavior. As with the natural sciences, the task of the social sciences is understanding, in particular how social mechanisms "structure" but do not determine outcomes. We turn then to an account of how this is to be conceived, drawing on the key distinction between "brute facts" or facts about features of the world that exist independently of us, and "institutional facts" or facts about features of the world which require human institutions for their existence (Searle, 1995). The usual "subjective/objective" dichotomy is fruitfully undermined. Following Giddens (1984), then, social structure is conceptualized as "real," incarnate in the activities of persons, but, accordingly, having no independent existence. If so, versus stronger forms of the idea of social structure, it cannot, like a magnetic field, be causal.

Chapter 4, "Agents and Generative Social Mechanisms" presses the causal mechanism analogy to physical science. In the physical sciences, regress to more fundamental mechanisms is sometimes possible. So quantum theory offers a generative mechanism of processes in molecular chemistry. But in social science, since persons are the critical causes of everything that occurs in the social world, the generative mechanisms are the actions of persons "working with materials at hand," and no further reduction is either possible or necessary. Drawing on the argument regarding agent/structure duality, a systematic account of the construction of models of social mechanisms is offered. The chapter offers a range of illustrative examples drawn from various writers including Marx, Willis, Goffman, Tilly, Ogbu, Burawoy and others. For example, following Willis, a social mechanism can be theorized which give us an understanding of why working class kids get working class jobs. This involves identifying (typically) their place in society, their beliefs about their "world"—some true and some false, typical behavior predicated on these beliefs, and the consequences of this behavior, mostly unintended. The argument shows that an ethnographic (and hermeneutic moment) is essential to getting a grasp of a social mechanism, but as Weber had long since noted, it was but the first step in social scientific inquiry. That is, while we need to understand the social world as members understand it, we need to go beyond this and to consider the adequacy of their understanding of their world. Since social process is the product of our activity, and since members may well *misunderstand* their 'world,' social science is potentially emancipatory.

Chapter 5, "Social Science and History," is very much influenced by the work of Max Weber. It looks critically at the question of history and its relation to sociology

beginning with the century old debate over the distinction between two kinds of science, "nomothetic" and "idiographic" and the attending argument that explanation in the nomothetic sciences proceeds by appeal to "general laws," while explanation in the human sciences requires *verstehen* and a narrative rhetorical form. The idea of a historical sociology gives us direct access to current versions of the pertinent issues, including the role of comparative analysis in identifying causes. Disagreements over the nature of a historical sociology can be resolved with a proper understanding of the nature and goals of social science. Briefly, if the goal is understanding, for example, of why working class kids get working class jobs (Willis) or why in "total institutions" (Goffman) outcomes are inconsistent with their explicit goals, one does not require history, even if, as Weber insisted, our interest remains the historically concrete. That is, unlike the natural sciences where there are "general theories" of generative mechanisms, in the social sciences, the generative social mechanisms are always historically situated. Thus, while the generative mechanisms of, for example, oxidation are everywhere the same, the mechanisms which explain why working class kids get working class jobs needs to be concretely theorized. But social science very often goes beyond the effort to understand a social process. Very often, unlike the "abstract" natural sciences, it seeks the explanation of concrete events and episodes, for example, the collapse of a regime, a depression, a dramatic rise in divorces. To achieve this goal, in addition to an understanding of the pertinent concrete generative mechanisms, one *also* needs history—as Weber rightly contended. In these cases, explanation takes the form of a narrative which identifies the critical social mechanisms and links them sequentially with the contingent but causally pertinent acts of persons. As with Chapter 4, ample illustrations are provided.

Chapter 6 looks critically at one of most influential and thoroughly theorized social mechanisms in the social scientific literature: the market model of neo-classical economics. This tradition was quite correct in what it sought to do, and its difficulties do not stem from its effort to offer explanations in terms of actors. The problem is not that markets are not social mechanisms which can give us an understanding of outcomes by appeal to the actions of persons—the bogey of methodological individualism, but that the basic model makes assumptions about explanation, and very strong assumptions about the actors, their conditions and their behavior, which simply are not sustained, except perhaps in the remotest of cases. Mainstream neo-classical theory accepts the covering law model of explanation and a deductivist conception of theory. If this idea of science is misconceived, however, then these models are, on their face, a poor choice for thinking that economics is an advanced social science. Moreover, in order to carry out its "deductivist" program, the assumptions of the theory have little relation to reality. Put succinctly, on the mainstream view, persons are conceived as atomized, and as historically indifferent "rational beings" with approximately similar motivations. And, even more important, they are conceived as having approximately equal powers and capacities. But CEOs of corporations, mom and pop Chinese restaurateurs, heart surgeons, immigrant farm workers, non-unionized plumbers, unionized auto workers, part-time female salesclerks, public school teachers and drug dealers—one could on, do not have similar beliefs *or* capacities—either as "producers" or as "consumers." Drawing on familiar criticisms, the chapter examines critically the neo-classical model and argues that it has been burdened by a spurious

(positivist) theory of social science. Markets are important social mechanisms, but, drawing on the account of the preceding chapters, a sociologically richer model is shown to be both possible and necessary.

There are four appendices. They are included as appendices since for the interested reader, they address the critical literature and provide supplementary materials not essential to the central argument of the volume. Appendix A, treats the limits of multiple regression and similar techniques, given a proper understanding of causality and explanation. Appendices B and C, pick up on arguments in the current literature highly relevant to the arguments of the volume. Appendix B considers the lively debate in *The American Journal of Sociology* over the pertinence of rational choice theory in historical sociology. The effort is made to clarify the argument and to resolve it. Similarly, Appendix C considers the dispute between Theda Skocpol and William Sewell regarding narrative and causal analysis. A very recent defense of the use of Mill's methods in historical sociology is examined critically. The goal of comparative work is further clarified. Appendix D offers some additional explication and criticism of neo-classical theory.