

ON THE SCOPE AND FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY

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The question of whether sociology is a purely positive science, relying solely on the inductive method for its findings, or whether it is at the same time a science which makes use of philosophical or even theological postulates, seems to be a matter of definition, as Dr. Ariston Estrada has pointed out.

Sociology could be taken to include only that body of knowledge concerning man's behavior in society as can be gathered from observation.

Or it could be taken to include that same body of knowledge, but as unified by some principle and interpreted in the light of certain truths about man which can not be arrived at merely by observation.

"Positivistic sociology" can be said to describe *how* men behave in society. Sociology taken in the other sense would go further and also also attempt to explain *why* they behave that way.

The difficulty might be resolved, therefore, by stating clearly in which sense one uses the term "sociology".

It was brought out during the discussion that sociology as a distinct science is a relatively new one and is even now still in the process of development. It is not surprising, therefore, that the term should be used in various senses, or that sociologists should differ on the question of the scope of the science.

Historically, sociology as a distinct science had its roots in positivism. But there does not seem to be any reason why sociology cannot flourish in the soil of another philosophy, of a different and perhaps fuller view of man and the universe.

Positivism represents a particular view of the universe, as well as a particular method or approach in gathering data. As a view of the universe, it is a philosophy, and therefore provides the postulates for any science rooted in it. The question is, is this view true or not; for if it were false, then the science would be vitiated at its roots; if there were no such thing as true or false, or if it were impossible at the outset to know the truth, then there would be no science.

On the other hand, positivism also represents a method of gathering data, suspending all value judgments. There seems to be no quarrel about that. You can approach a subject from any point of view, provided you understand the limitations of your particular approach. You can be content with mere description, provided you do not assume that description tells you all there is to know about your subject—for the moment you do, you will be making a value judgment. You would be assuming that your subject is a certain nature, of such a nature that description exhausts all there is to know about it. Or at least you would be assuming certain things about the ability of the human mind to know. You would be studied purely from the biological standpoint, but you would not conclude that what you can learn about man in this way is all there is to know about him.

The trouble is, this is what in fact happens among many "positivistic sociologists".

The limitation of the descriptive method in sociology is that it merely describes, but does not explain, social phenomena. If we are satisfied with a description, well and good. But if we want an explanation of the nature and causes of social phenomena, then we must go beyond description; we must ask ourselves what, in the first place, was our conception of man when we started our inquiry—for we shall never understand what society is unless we know what man is. We would, in other words, inevitably be thrown back on our postulates.

Whether or not these postulates are to be considered part of sociology, or segregated and clearly labeled "philosophy"—for that is where they would ultimately be borrowed from—the point that needs stressing, it seems to me, is that these postulates are important and should not be lightly dismissed as "unscientific".

For even if sociology were limited to data gathered from observation, the next question is, what do we make of these data? How do we evaluate and interpret them? How shall we know what is good or bad for society unless we know what is good or bad for men unless we know what man is?

Again we must go back to our postulates, whether we consider these postulates philosophy or part of sociology.

The alternative is to render sociology sterile, an end in itself, a study of man but a study more preoccupied with its method than with its object.