

CONSERVATIVE VISIONARIES: SOCIAL SCIENCE AND POLITICAL EXCELLENCE

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The definition of Political Excellence is a matter of values, not a question for science. The Social Sciences, therefore, cannot solve the problem of Political Excellence; all they can do is to take a value-commitment determined elsewhere and help to implement it. But at the same time, since Social-Scientific positions are rooted in values, individual Social Scientists can contribute to a broader debate about social and cultural value-commitments by systematically elaborating them in their empirical work.

In some ways, it is difficult for me to say much of anything about the potential contribution of the social sciences to a discussion about political excellence. In part, this is because once we start trying to determine the broader meaning of "excellence," political or otherwise, we have passed over a line dividing science from politics. But it would be folly to deny that social science is connected to such broader questions of value, even if the connection is only indirect-social science is through and through perspectival, rooted in value-laden cultural contexts in ways that contradict any claim to outmoded notions of classical objectivity (Jackson 2008). Two conclusions follow. First, social science as social science-and social scientists as social scientists-cannot resolve value-questions through systematic knowledge-production, so the social sciences cannot tell us what "political excellence" is or might be. But at the same time, by developing value-commitments into analytical tools and carefully specifying their practical implications, social scientists and the social sciences can both stimulate and discipline process of broader social and cultural imagination, and thereby help to birth novel ways of making sense of our situation.

As might be obvious, my position takes its cue from Max Weber's seminal reflections on the difference between politik and wissenschaft. Weber sought to differentiate between two fundamental orientations-Weber called them "vocations"-towards social life: the scientific orientation that has as its goal the systematic production of knowledge, and the political orientation that has as its goal the generating of concrete worldly results and the promotion of specific value-laden programs of action. This Weberian distinction has often been misunderstood: the "value-freedom" (Wertfreiheit) of science is not, contrary to popular belief, an assertion that science can somehow embody a perspective-less "view from nowhere," but more of an admonition for scientists to keep their professional distance from partisan political projects.

"If you speak about democracy at a public meeting," Weber observed, "there is no need to make a secret of your personal point of view. The words you use are not tools of academic analysis, but a way of winning others over to your political point of view" and "swords to be used against your opponents: weapons, in short" (Weber 2004: 20). This political approach, explicitly directed at bringing about some particular end, stands in sharp contrast to a properly scientific use of terms and concepts "as a means for the comparison and measurement of actuality," and as such a scientist must always avoid using her or his conceptual instruments as the basis for an "evaluative interpretation" of phenomena (Weber 1999: 199). Politics is about defeating opponents and passing moral judgment on existing institutions inasmuch as they approximate some ideal condition; science is about creating valid knowledge about those existing institutions, regardless of their ultimate moral standing.

But it does not follow from this distinction that scientific analysis is somehow devoid of values. Indeed, Weber argues that:

There is simply no "objective" scientific analysis of cultural life-or, put perhaps somewhat more narrowly but certainly not essentially differently for our purposes-of a "social phenomenon" independent of special and "one-sided" points of view, according to which-explicitly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously-they are selected, analyzed, and representationally organized as an object of research (Weber 1999: 170).

What makes science "science" is not that it embodies no value-commitments, but that it does something specific with those value-commitments: science uses value-commitments to construct ideal-types which can then be called into service in the empirical analysis of the actually existing world.

An ideal-type is formed through the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete individual phenomena, present sometimes more, sometimes less, and occasionally not at all, which are arranged according to those one-sided emphatic points of view into a unified construction in thought. In its conceptual purity, this thought construction can be empirically found nowhere in reality, it is a utopia (Weber 1999: 191).

Several things are noteworthy in this account of the social-scientific process. First, ideal-types are not pictorial representations of objects or entities; they are more like deliberate caricatures or partial sketches, or perhaps specialized conceptual filters that focus our attention on particular aspects of actually existing things to the detriment of other aspects of those same things. Second, this deliberate partiality is less due to any putatively dispositional characteristics of the object under study, and more to the "emphatic points of

view"-value-commitments-which direct us to focus on particular aspects and not others. From this it follows, third, that a different researcher, formalizing different value-commitments into a different analytic, might well focus on different aspects of the same entity or object, and they would not in any simple sense be "wrong" for doing so (Weber 1999: 192). Finally, ideal-types are not ideals; even though they derive from and supervene on value-commitments, they are logically quite different than either an assertion of a value-commitment or a philosophical case for that commitment.

At the risk of belaboring the point, let me point out that an assessment of an institutional or organizational arrangement according to a posited set of goals is a logically distinct matter from using such a set of goals to pass a moral judgment on that institutional or organizational arrangement. Think for a moment of an engineer commissioned to build a bridge across a river; the engineer can evaluate various plans in terms of their technical feasibility and cost, but can't really question the moral and ethical status of the broader parameters of the overall traffic plan that calls for a bridge unless she or he stops acting as an engineer and starts acting as a politician. Similarly, put a group of experts on constitutional design in a room and ask them to design a structure maximizing stability, or individual liberty, and they'll have social-scientific discussions about the contribution of weighted voting schemes and veto powers to those ideals-but simply ask them to design "the ideal constitution" and you'll get a wide-ranging political debate about which goals ought to be pursued. Unlike the narrow technical discussion, the wider debate is inextricably entwined with the active making of moral and ethical judgments-precisely what a scientist qua scientist ought not to be doing. Whether proportional representation allows a more accurate recording of citizen preferences is a social-scientific question; whether we ought to be paying attention to citizen preferences, or whether a government that does so is morally superior to one that does not, is a logically distinct species of claim.

From within a framework of value-commitments, a scientist can render a professional assessment of likely outcomes, but when it comes to that framework itself a social scientist has no more or less professional competence than anyone else. What this means, I think, is not that social science or social scientists are by definition ethically neutral, but that we need to keep debates about broader moral and cultural values separate from technical discussions among narrowly-trained professionals. There are undoubtedly great advantages to scientific specialization, including intensity of focus and the opportunity to engage in fine-grained controversies designed to enhance knowledge, but we ought not to conflate that specialization with any special authority on moral and cultural values! In this sense, it remains true that (as Dostoyevsky put it) science cannot tell us how to live, and this goes for social science as well.

But the fact that social scientists have no special competence to engage in debates about social and cultural values does not imply that they have no engagement with those debates. Indeed, the ideal-typical character of the analytical tools and concepts with which social science operates ensures that contemporary cultural values are fundamental to scientific inquiry. Values come first, providing a context and an impetus for social-scientific work. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the first intellectual move in conducting a piece of social-scientific research necessarily involves the researcher's taking

a stand within the complex field of cultural values that she or he inhabits. Of course, the range of positions will be filtered through the concerns of the researcher's specific academic discipline and field of study, but cultural values are not the kinds of thing that inhabit a clearly-defined space cordoned off from the rest of social life—they surround and permeate everything. And cultural values (like, say, "political excellence") are not, for the most part, unambiguously fixed or nicely harmonized with every other cultural value; hence the need to take a stand and adopt a position.

This clarification of one's value-orientation is not yet social science, but it is a necessary precondition of conducting intellectually honest social science. If one were to stop with a value-orientation, all one could do is to stand on that position, and either rest content with it or seek, through political debate and political action, to defend it against contrary positions or even establish its moral or philosophical superiority. The social scientist takes another step, and formalizes that value-commitment so as to produce an ideal-typical analytic, suitable for application to empirical cases so as to produce facts—which are, as David Easton reminds us, "particular ordering[s] of reality in terms of a theoretical interest" (Easton 1953: 53). This is the difference between, for example, the assertion that human agency ought to be cherished and expanded (a value-orientation) and a concrete empirical account of how human agency, now transmuted into an ideal-typical analytical view of social interaction, is implicated in the creation of some specific organization or practice (a piece of empirical social science). Cultural values are therefore critical to social science, but indirectly.

This indirect relationship between science and cultural values offers a unique opportunity to the social scientist: because she or he is not, qua social scientist, a direct participant in debates about values, she or he is free to take a set of value-orientations and creatively develop their empirical implications through systematic empirical analysis. Consider two contemporary ideal-typical analytics common throughout the contemporary social sciences: the "rational actor" engaged in means-ends calculations and opportunity-cost tradeoffs, and the "competent communicator" embedded in webs of meaning and significance and actively, if unconsciously, participating in the reproduction of the social and cultural resources on which she or he draws in order to act. Both of these analytics are what Donald Moon (1975) calls "models of man"—visions of what human beings are in their core essence. Gendered language aside, Moon's point is that social and political analysis invariably operates with some such model—a model that I would argue we should regard as a formalization of a set of value-commitments.

Consequently, we should regard social-scientific analyses conducted using either of these contemporary models less as falsifiable depictions of reality and more as systematic elaborations of the basic value-commitments at their core. At their best, such analyses give us relatively clear pictures of how a world built out of those value-commitments would look, what its dynamics would be, and how it would function in practice—all pieces of insight and information that could be fed back into the broader cultural and political debate about the comparative value of those very value-commitments themselves. Making social science of these two opposed value-commitments, then, sharpens the dispute between them even as it shifts that dispute out of the likely unsolvable realm of value-contestation and into the

potentially more tractable realm of the concrete consequences of a possible world. Of course, this capacity to envision a possible world is in no way unique to the social sciences. Indeed, the contemporary social sciences often fall far short of effectively utilizing this capacity, focused as are on narrow technical discussions and the provision of short-term policy-relevant advice to governments. The mantle of envisioning possible worlds is more often taken up by authors and filmmakers and artists-sometimes quite capably, especially in the case of the best speculative fiction-but this comes at a cost: relegating our cultural imagination to spheres and genres that operate with a considerably less stringent demand to engage with actuality or to produce defensible facts opens the possibility of simply dismissing the whole operation as "unrealistic." Stop envisioning fantastic possibilities, a critic might easily say; stick to the here and now. Then we would sustain a socially established distinction between "imagination" and "reality," as though there were such a thing as an apprehension of reality that was not at root a creative elaboration of social and cultural values-and as though the social and cultural actuality that we presently inhabit were not itself a contingent, and hence modifiable, arrangement of practices. The result: a reification of the present, as it is imbued with more solidity and stability that it perhaps warrants.

As I have suggested, the alternative is for the social sciences to remember their indirect but important connection to the sphere of cultural values. There is precedent for such a robust and disciplined process of social and cultural envisioning in the mid-twentieth century social science of figures like Hannah Arendt and Karl Polanyi, who were actively seeking to understand the character of their unsettled times by creatively redeploying extant cultural resources to produce novel fact-producing analytics (Katznelson 2003). Although their successors ended up producing a social and political science that traded its expansive vision and broader commitment to creative imagination in favor of a narrower focus on technical puzzles and near-term policy recommendations, the potential remains for a social science that would be both conservative and visionary: it would conserve value-commitments by building ideal-typical analytics out of them and then systematically investigating their consequences, and it would be visionary in seeking not so much to mirror or represent the world as to portray the world from a disciplined, rigorously-elaborated perspective. Such a pragmatic social science would "conserve and not waste the values wrought by humanity" (Dewey 1920: 18), even as it moved beyond a simple assertion or defense of those values and into an elaboration of their practical consequences.

Such a social science would also be critical of efforts to forestall those broader political and cultural debates about a notion like "political excellence" and to replace public contestation with expert declaration. Cultural resources for meaning-making-and values are surely cultural resources!-are common possessions of the members of a community, and therefore ought to be kept out of any proprietary hands. "What is political excellence?" is not a factual question, but a value question; it is part of the cultural politics of everyday life (Shotter 1993), and ought not be turned into a matter for scientific specialists. Such an assertive self-limitation of the sphere of social science-limiting science so as to make room for politics, to paraphrase Kant-may be the most important contribution that social science

can make to this discussion.

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