

The Objects of Scientific Desire

The Objects of Social Science

By Eleonora Montuschi

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Review by Brian Caterino

The objectivity of knowledge has been the gold standard for valid knowledge since the beginnings of the modern era. Objectivity has defined knowledge externally, that is, detached and purified from the standpoint of the participant in practical life and which for that reason yields valid knowledge. For many philosophers, the pursuit of objective knowledge of nature was equated with realism. Here the inquirer stands in an immediate relation to nature without the mediation of culture or society. Truth is correspondence with reality. The object of knowledge has a description independent quality. Science was to discern the immutable laws of nature by which events were governed. Explanation took a nomological form.

Eleonora Montuschi in *The Objects of Social Science* thinks the application of the naturalistic model to social inquiry, no matter how “suitably modified,” is a false comparison. Social Science is put at an intractable disadvantage; it can never measure up to an impossible standard. “The history of social science” according to Montuschi, “is also a history of endless adjustment of the protocols of natural ‘real’ science, in order to let them meet the specific needs of, and comply with the features belonging to social scientific practice” (2). All such strategies and comparisons make social science a junior partner in the scientific enterprise. An overly rigid identification of objectivity and being scientific means that much valid work must be discarded. Not only is social scientific inquiry always value relevant, it requires subjective and interpretive elements, which can never be purified or eliminated. But under rigorist assumptions all criticism of value free inquiry are attacks on science.

For the proponents of the *geisteswissenschaften* in the 19th century too the object of social science was misplaced. The aim of social inquiry was not prediction and control of social nature thought immutable general laws of human action, social inquiry sought understanding of the (unique) significance of events. This distinctive aim of social inquiry also implied a

different relation to the “object” of inquiry. Social inquiry only had access to the meanings of cultures thought an internal participant’s perspective.

Post-empiricist and post-positivist currents have added another layer to this argument. Rather than rest on the division of the sciences they argue that the realist picture of the natural sciences is itself flawed. There is no description independent object of natural science—or for that matter any science. Natural science is itself a form of interpretation. Richard Rorty, for example, rejects “Diltheyan” claims about the division of the sciences. The relevant distinction is not between the natural and the social sciences, but between realist and antirealist epistemologies (Rorty, 1991:1). Post-empiricist theories challenge the received models of objectivity and scientific truth: “the orderly methodological rule-bound value free procure of natural science is a misrepresentation of what scientific research is in actual fact” (objects). In the more radical forms of post-empiricism, such as Rorty’s antirealism, science is a form of solidarity given by society and culture. It loses its authority and prescriptive power and levels the demarcation between science and ordinary knowledge.

Montuschi accepts major elements of the post-empiricist critique of (natural and social) science. She rejects the idea of any universal standard of objectivity and looks to science in practice as a guide to varying senses of objectivity. In so doing, however, she also tries to avoid the radical implication of Rortyeen antirealism: namely the blurring of the distinction between science and everyday knowledge.

Montuschi accepts the interpretive theorists emphasis on the meaningful character of the objects of inquiry. Here values don’t interfere with inquiry that is a necessary feature of it. The world of social life is inherently value-laden and contextual. The latter, contextual character of inquiry does not lead to skepticism about knowledge however, She sides with James Bohman’s view that valid knowledge requires a public intersubjective mode of assessment. Context is not simply limiting, but in the case of social science, enabling. The objects of social inquiries are socially constructed; other humans are involved in construction of categories, according to Montuschi in a way natural objects are not.

While Montuschi accepts the views of critical realists and interpretivists concerning the involvements of subjects in the construction of categories through which they are evaluated, she rejects any claim for methodological priority in social science. Both the nomological model and the human sciences model are *normative*. “They prescribe what features the object

of social science must possess in order to qualify for what is to be taken to be the correct mode of inquiry” (objects, p. 16). In short they are *a priori*. They prescribe in advance what we ought to do. Montuschi wants to focus on what the object “is” not what it should be. This implies 1) that we detach the notion of being objective from any ideal model and return to a description of the constitution of objects themselves and 2) that description precedes prescription. The task of a philosophy of social science is more one of description than prescription.

Montuschi elaborates her project using contemporary analytic approaches to the social construction of categories. In the selecting, organizing and classification of categorization, Montuschi argues we should reject John Searle’s idea of a unified logic “underlying the constitution of social (institutional) facts” and instead follow Nelson Goodman and Ian Hacking in looking to a pluralist conception of world making (objects, 17). The notion of interactive kinds developed by Hacking, which acknowledges that categories are not fixed natural kinds, seems to open the way to such a pluralist conception of world making. Montuschi follows a strategy of investigating the constitution object domains in social science in their specificity. The idea of objectivity is here relative to the “object” under scrutiny.

In many respects this is a useful book suited both for an introductory course or an advanced seminar. Though brief it provides a useful introduction to major debates in social inquiry and in specialized fields like anthropology sociology, economics, history and geography. Though the non-inclusion of political science is a problem, Montuschi’s brief discussions are well organized and succinct. I do not think however that her object-oriented approach is as fruitful for social science as she claims.

Montuschi’s approach remains too closely tied to an analytic and Neo-Kantian conception of world constituting activity. She cannot account for the full scope of interpretive access to the social world. This leads to some fundamental ambiguities in her project.

While rejecting Kant’s universalism, Montuschi relies on a Kantian version of object constitution. Along with Kant she rejects any correspondence between object and reality, such as those found in correspondence theories of truth. Objects are not given ontologically but are furnished as necessary conditions of objective knowledge (objects, 20). Mind confers forms of objectivity. Montuschi argues that this Kantian view differs from the “normative” approaches she criticizes because it is

“regulative.”

Of course Montuschi does not employ a Kantian framework without reserve. Rejecting Kant’s view of mind as transcendental subjectivity, she considers the formation of categories as a social and cultural activity which is a symbolic form in Cassier’s sense. It defines objects of possible cultural experience (objects, 146, n76). This gives her formulation a plural element lacking in Kant’s theory.

It is a simple step from this conception of symbolic constitution to the notion that social science theories are autonomous domains, symbolic forms that construct their own conditions of experience. Theoretical domains are constituted through the specific forms and techniques of research that are employed. These can be seen as distinct from ordinary knowledge. But at this point there is a certain ambiguity in Montuschi’s argument regarding the status of symbolic forms. While she purports to follow an interpretive linguistic approach in her philosophy of social science, the Kantian/Cassierian model falls behind the linguistic turn. Rather than looking to conditions of possible experience, which even in its cultural form reconstitute a kind of transcendental position, linguistic models disclose the world as a practical achievement as forms of possible or actual mutual understanding. Thus for example her use of Bohman’s model of intersubjective assessment would require the later model, but she has not read it through the former. The mutual understanding model requires a much closer tie between everyday experience and research than Montuschi can allow (Habermas, 2001). Thus there is a tension between Montuschi’s use of symbolically mediated understating and her neo-Kantian frame. In addition, it is not clear how this position would support the post-empiricist frame she seems to endorse.

To be sure, there is more than a grain of truth in the constructivist perspective. The world as we know has no inherent purpose goal or meaning. But the Kantian/neo-Kantian image of imposing meaning on a meaningless world does not capture the nature of interpretive access to reality. The social world as we encounter it is never a blank slate, but a world of already constituted meanings which participants must take up and accept, reject or modify. In the social world participants are bound together through forms of mutual understanding. Since individuals have to take up the world in common, they also must be accountable to one another. Focus on the characteristics of the participant’s perspective has implications for the conception of a quasi-autonomous social theoretical

realm.

The social inquirer has access to the world of participants through her own involvements in social life. Social Scientists must be able to use their capacities for understanding and judgment to grasp the sense of fellow participants in a culture as well as participants in socially distant cultures. A complex social practice, like say the gift relationship, requires the ability on the part of the inquirer to discern not merely the classifications of a particular culture, or a specific rule, but the situated sense of whether a social practice, rule or a classification is being used appropriately. A gift for example must be properly timed, must be in the correct proportion, etc., to be appreciated. This feature applies to all social practices. They can be employed by participants correctly or incorrectly. In order to grasp this the inquirer must become if only virtually a co-interpreter in a process aimed at mutual understanding.

Montuschi grasps most of these elements in isolation but, limited by the boundaries of a neo-Kantian framework, she cannot grasp how such elements of interpretive understanding count against the analytically informed notions of world-construction that she employs. She sees world making, classifications and concepts as analytically separate ways of dividing up and fixing a meaningless world. Similarly, research constructs the theorist's world as functions of analytical processes that create social scientific objects in the very process of analysis.

Social worlds however cannot be understood through description alone. They are disclosed holistically and normatively in and through participant's perspectives. Social worlds are legitimate or illegitimate order. Classifications and categories are embedded notions of the good, the right or the desirable. They promote or impede human flourishing. Given this notion of world disclosure I do not think it is feasible to put description before evaluation. Thus while it is certainly true that we can view the object domain of social science from more than one angle, this does not imply that interpretive methods are monolithic or prescriptive in the *a priori* sense the author employs.

Social science procedures are more like reconstructions than social constructions. The scientist elaborates a framework that can make sense of every day actions of participants. They try to exploit forms of understanding that are intuitively understood as practices. On the one hand this means that reconstructive social sciences are regulative in Montuschi's sense. On the other hand, this also means that social science is linked to questions

of social practice. The constitution of social science objects is linked to the everyday aims of mutual understanding. The problem with naturalistic methodology is its inability to recognize the domain of social action. It is not simply object constitution but the relation between methods and aims that is at stake. What we aim at finding and critically assessing is the (moral, ethical, aesthetic) significance of social knowledge.

References

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