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Michael Burawoy

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positivism and its epistemological others

GEORGE STEINMETZ, EDITOR



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#842168 in Books Duke University Press Books 2005-05-16 2005-05-16 Original language: English PDF # 1
9.25 x 1.59 x 6.00l, 1.90 #File Name: 0822335182620 pages | File size: 77.Mb

Michael Burawoy : The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others (Politics, History, and Culture) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others (Politics, History, and Culture):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Penetrating Analysis of the Political Dimension in the Logic of Method By Johannes Bakker George Steinmetz is the editor of this volume. It is not clear why Michael Burawoy's name comes first. That is misleading. This is an excellent set of readings. The title says it all. At one time a "Positivist" version of social science was the leading contender for paradigmatic hegemony, although there were other approaches even then. The Symbolic Interactionist, Ethnomethodological and Conversation Analysis points of view and research paradigms were already in place. But after the late 1960s there was a significant challenge to Positivism in sociology, although not necessarily at the same time in psychology and hardly at all in economics. The notion of "Political Economy" made a comeback in social sciences. The attempt to be like the physical and natural sciences had been greatly amplified in the U.S. because of the situation post WWII and the funding that was made available to Ivy League universities that had not really engaged in a lot of top notch research before WWII. Foundation money flowed into the premier universities and they became "research universities" in ways they had not all been before. Minnesota, Wisconsin, Stanford and Berkeley also benefited greatly from the Post War boom in funding for natural sciences, biological and physical. The social sciences did not receive as much money, but it was much more than most social science disciplines were used to getting. (The only exception was rural sociology, which had benefited from the 1862 and even 1890s land grant situation.) The chapters of this book are not all in complete agreement, but the overall thesis is quite well presented. There are, however, many versions of "Positivism." Indeed, it is not inappropriate to speak of Positivisms. Neo-classical economics now has some heterodox opposition and Neo-Marxian economics is not dead. Critical Realism had a significant influence in Neo-Marxian circles. Postmodernist literary analysis influenced social science theory. Much of psychology remains fixated on sophisticated summary measures of correlation. Geography has physical geography, which is very Positivist. Physical anthropology (including Forensic anthropology) is also still Positivist for the most part. Cliometrics has faded. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in the philosophy of social science, the philosophy of natural-physical science, and the history of ideas. It is especially strong on sociology, although some of the many strands of sociology are not fully represented. One key idea presented here is that the Logic of Method (capital "M" Methodology) needs to be carefully considered in terms of the politics of networks of scholars and researchers pushing a specific epistemology. The idea of "methodological individualism" has become a way of eliding the ontological questions raised by David Emile Durkheim about society as a reality *sui generis*.

The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences provides a remarkable comparative assessment of the variations of positivism and alternative epistemologies in the contemporary human sciences. Often declared obsolete, positivism is alive and well in a number of the fields; in others, its influence is significantly diminished. The essays in this collection investigate its mutations in form and degree across the social science disciplines. Looking at methodological assumptions field by field, individual essays address anthropology, area studies, economics, history, the philosophy of science, political science and political theory, and sociology. Essayists trace disciplinary developments through the long twentieth century, focusing on the decades since World War II. Contributors explore and contrast some of the major alternatives to positivist epistemologies, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, narrative theory, and actor-network theory. Almost all the essays are written by well-known practitioners of the fields discussed. Some essayists approach positivism and anti-positivism via close readings of texts influential in their respective disciplines. Some engage in ethnographies of the present-day human sciences; others are more historical in method. All of them critique contemporary social scientific practice. Together, they trace a trajectory of thought and method running from the past through the present and pointing toward possible futures. Contributors. Andrew Abbott, Daniel Breslau, Michael Burawoy, Andrew Collier, Michael Dutton, Geoff Eley, Anthony Elliott, Stephen Engelmann, Sandra Harding, Emily Hauptmann, Webb Keane, Tony Lawson, Sophia Mihic, Philip Mirowski, Timothy Mitchell, William H. Sewell Jr., Margaret R. Somers, George Steinmetz, Elizabeth Wingrove

By contrasting the diverse trajectories and strategies of positivist method within each discipline, The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences develops a comparative perspective which has been lacking in virtually all prior treatments of positivism in social science. The contrasts in the form and prestige that positivist method assumed in each discipline are striking. Craig Calhoun, President of the Social Science Research Council