Interpretation and Social Science

A Review Essay of James Bohman’s New Philosophy of Social Science

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James Bohman argues in his book, *New Philosophy of Social Science*, that it is time to reconceptualize the social sciences and conclusively abandon any illusory aspirations to a unified methodological perspective that might have lingered since Hobbes sought to borrow one from classical mechanics. In addition, Bohman suggests that reflecting on the history of the social sciences and their explanatory practices forces a shift in our understanding of what the social sciences are and do.

He himself takes up this task by considering the challenges to the nineteenth and early twentieth-century understandings of the distinctions between the natural and the human sciences raised by the post-empiricist critiques of positivism and of empiricism. These critiques include suspicion that observation and experience are not “neutral” in any easy sense, hold that data and theory are intimately connected, that knowledge may be local not universal, that theory choice can drive conclusions and reflect prejudices, and question the ideal of a univocal language. Post-empiricism forced a series of new epistemological debates in the social sciences, shaped by attention to actual and specific practices and to the histories of the various sciences. One outcome of these debates is an anti-essentialist view of what counts as scientific knowledge and a denial that any universal or necessary set of features qualifies a practice to be scientific, or an explanation to be adequate.

Bohman argues that these positions challenge “new” philosophers of social science who accept the critiques of positivist social science but seek to resolve difficulties posed by them without retreating to an ahistorical essentialist epistemology. If, for example, anti-essentialists are right to argue that our scientific practices are to be understood as local, we are left with no way to compare or evaluate them because they are incommensurable practices, defined and understood in the context only of particular historical communities. A second and related issue arises when a commitment to such extreme localism prevents identification of universal features of explanation undercutting the possibility of understanding the normative features of the explanations constitutive
of scientific practice. This makes it difficult to ascertain criteria for sorting out better and worse explanations and for determining standards of theoretical adequacy. Additional problems arise with the critique of the positivist model of agency which earlier social scientists adopted in an effort to establish determinate laws for behaviors which Bohman holds to be essentially indeterminate.

While Hempel insisted on predictive success as the mark of the theoretical adequacy of social scientific claims about how and why social agents do what they do, Bohman (1991, p. 48) demands that we acknowledge that social scientific claims are inevitably indeterminate because social actions are performed by reflective social actors who interact with other social actors:

Reasons are not connected to actions through anything like general laws, but through various mechanisms which may be both intentional (as is the case for cognitive mechanisms) or non-intentional (as in the case of biological and sometimes macrosociological mechanisms).

Since reasons do not function like mechanical laws, the proper form of explanation in the social sciences must be both non-reductionist and non-determinist. While the “old” social sciences would have sorted out competing and conflicting “scientific” claims by appeals to an epistemological derivation of standards of hypothetico-deductive reasoning, or to empirical proofs, the “new” post-empiricist social sciences must assess and then justify claims through a defense of the research program that produced them, appealing to what Bohman describes as weaker forms of theoretical assessment and justification. The fundamental aim of post-empiricist social science is to offer a compelling and coherent account of intentional social action, and its fundamental problem is to justify a particular account as more adequate than alternative and perhaps conflicting ones. It is Bohman’s central thesis that the social sciences can accommodate the indeterminacy which reflective agency makes inevitable while still providing “rigorous” explanations, and he goes to great and convincing lengths to persuade us that eschewing reductivism and determinism does not rule out explanatory rigor. Since a commitment to antiessentialism prevents us from defining rigor in terms of some neutral epistemological standard, Bohman (1991, p. 66) argues that we must reconstruct various research programs which search for explanatory patterns and specify “necessary but not sufficient conditions for . . . validity.”

Such reconstructions make clear that different explanatory patterns account for different phenomena from different perspectives to different ends, using different standards of what counts as an explanation. Though two explanations of the same phenomena can be very different, both can be successful within their explanatory