

The Scientific Study of Society, Max Steuer. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003, xiii + 464 pages.

Max Steuer's readable book offers both an introduction to contemporary work in social science and also a defense of some general views about the nature of this kind of inquiry. Practicing social scientists will likely warm to its instinctive sympathy for their work. What of philosophers? Although both the author and Ken Binmore in the foreword are eager to deny that this book is an exercise in philosophy, its central claims – that a scientific study of society is possible and that its method is distinct from other ways of producing social knowledge – express meta-propositions about social science. What is distinct about Steuer's approach is his conviction that these questions are best addressed not through abstract argument but rather by carefully examining what social scientists actually do. In this spirit, while chapters in the beginning and the end of the book contain his general, or philosophical, discussion, at the heart of Steuer's inquiry are six central chapters comprising long and painstaking reports of actual research. By the author's own admission, the philosophical discussions at either end of the book are of a rather informal nature and do not seek to engage explicitly with the philosophical literature. Rather, the rhetorical strategy is one of argument by illustration. Does it succeed?

The arguments presented in the early chapters are typical of a broadly naturalistic view of social science. Thus social science's goals are taken to be similar in kind to those of natural science, and its relatively bad empirical record to be explained by a number of practical disadvantages it faces. One is that the phenomena studied by social science are subject to change at a much greater rate. Physical and biological phenomena also change, but many of their underlying principles are both quite stable and also directly relevant to explanation and intervention. In the social world, the underlying principles (for example, self-interested behavior in the economic sphere) may be relatively stable too. However, the fast-changing superficial features, such as credit cards, television and computers, are often the ones most in need of explanation as well as being powerful agents of change in their own right. This alone makes it difficult to isolate categories and identify reliable causal relationships. A second disadvantage is that controlled experiments, often taken to be the gold standard of causal inference, are much less available to social scientists. Finally, because the questions investigated by social scientists bear a closer relationship to our ethical and political allegiances, the threat of bias and loss of objectivity is greater. For their part, the two chapters at the end of the book comprise a self-consciously cautious attempt to draw general conclusions, covering four broad areas. First, Steuer seeks to provide a general characterization of each discipline on the basis of their principal foci of investigation and methodologies; second, to analyze and defend current disciplinary divisions; third, to pass a verdict on the current state of social science; and fourth, to argue for greater use of social science in public policy.

Being aimed more at lay readers, on their own these chapters will probably not convince philosophers who are unsympathetic. Therefore much weight falls on the six illustrative chapters at the heart of the book. Steuer's method is to trawl systematically through ten years of top journals in each of what he considers the five major social sciences, namely anthropology, economics, political science, social psychology and sociology. He reports papers in those journals bearing on six selected topics: crime, migration, family, money, housing and religion. In effect, the reports are then expected to speak largely for themselves: to show that social science is a feasible project, that it is better than the alternatives, and that those in positions of power should take its claims seriously. The hard work, ingenuity and sheer intellect that went into many of these studies is indeed impressive, and indeed well demonstrated by such extended illustration. The topics are chosen in such a way as to maximize coverage of similar issues by different disciplines from different perspectives. In reviewing the journal articles, Steuer reports the problems addressed by researchers, the conclusions arrived at and the methods employed.

Objections could be raised against the sampling procedure. Excluded from the survey are books (as opposed to journal articles), work not in English, papers in minor and specialist journals, work appearing directly on the internet, plus of course work on topics other than the six of interest. However, at least in the case of economics, books and mainstream work not in English tend to be similar in style to the journal articles surveyed, and minor journals and unrefereed internet material do not represent the mainstream in the first place. It is unclear whether the picture is quite so sanguine in the other social sciences, especially with respect to books and work not in English. Nevertheless we agree with Steuer that overall, at least for the purpose of comparing it with alternative approaches (see below), his method illustrates well enough social science as it is actually practiced.

A major virtue of these central chapters is their demonstration of the diversity of interests, methods and epistemic categories that social research produces. Firstly, different disciplines are interested in different aspects of the six broad topics. For example when it comes to crime social psychologists are fascinated by rape, economists more by white-collar crime. Secondly, what is taken to constitute appropriate data varies substantially. For instance, interviews with subjects are an essential part of hypothesis-building for social psychologists and anthropologists. But they matter little to economists who, rather than gauge motivations empirically, instead just make assumptions about them that they hope will be widely applicable. Thirdly, attitudes towards the appropriate methods for testing causal claims are also shown to vary widely: in economics (or some subfields of it) it is commonplace to accept or reject a causal hypothesis purely on the basis of its demonstrability in a mathematical model, but in sociology statistical tools are often used instead. Finally, Steuer makes some fascinating observations about the variety of epistemic categories at play in social science. In the chapter on family, he recounts how facts can be variously "direct" (uncontroversially verifiable), "contextual" (invoking broader social tendencies), "compiled" (statistically

aggregated), “stylized” (challengeable interpretations) and “high order” (claims about relations of facts).

So how successful for his larger purposes is Steuer’s strategy of argument by illustration? To answer that, it is necessary to be clear on who his targets are. Besides aiming to introduce the field to lay readers, another explicit motive is to contrast social science against the work of populist “frauds and impostors” (54) who “do something unscientific and pretend it is social science” (409). A second target are “people in universities who are antagonistic to science in any form” (17), and who doubt that society can be studied scientifically (409). A third complaint (chapter 12) is against what Steuer sees as the active ignorance of social science on the part of laypeople and policymakers. We may label these three targets informally as: ‘quacks’, unfriendly academics, and an ignorant public. We judge that the book succeeds against the first of these, not against the second, and only partially against the third.

Start with the first category. Steuer takes art, history and philosophy to be valid alternatives to social science, because these endeavors assume goals explicitly distinct from scientific explanation without “pretending to be social science” (54). The invalid alternatives come largely from outside universities. Steuer divides these activities into “social revelation”, “social criticism” and “social poetry” (55-62). The first includes popular attempts to explain all social phenomena by reference to some one overarching insight, such as network, risk, consumerism and so on. These characteristically do not draw on or respond to the large body of relevant empirical or theoretical work that exists in mainstream social science, instead relying on grand revelations aimed at accounting for social reality as a whole. Social critics, for their part, denounce problems in society through films, books, TV programs and the like. Their targets include the hypocrisies of suburban life, the media, global capitalism, etc. Finally in Steuer’s taxonomy, social poets aim at a primarily emotional impact by creating “penny-dropping” artistic experiences about life in the modern world.

Many populist examples of social analysis are indeed made to seem simplistic and ignorant merely by Steuer’s prolonged recounting of mainstream social science in action. To the extent that they want to claim the authority of social science, we thus judge the book to be an effective strike against them.

Turn now to the second category, and the more sophisticated threat represented by unfriendly academics, presumably those found in cultural theory, literary studies or other fields inspired broadly by 20th century Continental philosophy. A strand of these movements is taken to denounce rationality and the scientific outlook as a whole, or else to reinvent the purposes of social science completely. These opponents unfortunately are not so easily dealt with. Perhaps Steuer is reacting against what can sometimes seem a wilful ignorance of social science on their part. Nonetheless many of their arguments require responses beyond simple

illustration of existing social scientific work, as the latter on its own cannot make the case Steuer wants it to without better philosophical packaging.

One example of this is the claim in chapter 2 that science is characterized as a collective enterprise of building a “structure”. The building blocks of this structure are explanations of phenomena, which in turn rest on other explanations. These pieces need not fit together neatly, and connections between different explanations can be suspected, established or wholly non-existent. Nor does the structure need to be understood hierarchically. Rather, Steuer argues, the important features are that each individual scientist is working *within* and *in response to* the host of explanations put forward before her and that her claims in turn are subject to peer review. But we are skeptical whether this criterion alone is enough to demarcate social science from what Steuer calls “pretend social science” (424). Perhaps no demarcation can be expected to work smoothly everywhere, but arguably this one fails even at the initial stage. Postmodernism, poststructuralism, cultural studies and other approaches Steuer wishes to denounce all inspire work that could be described as providing understanding via building their own structures of connected explanations. Granted these explanations appeal to factors very different from those one finds in mainstream social science, but Steuer does not tell us why this difference matters and neither does his proposed criterion.

Turning to the third category, outside academia public awareness of social science is poor. Indeed, unlike natural science it is systematically ignored by the very people who could make best use of its findings, i.e. policymakers. Steuer concludes in the last chapter that this active ignorance is scandalous. A lot of current social science clearly aims at producing knowledge that in some way can be relevant for public policy. Yet, with the exception of economics, whose high prominence in government policy Steuer credits to the work of JM Keynes, social scientific research rarely figures in relevant public debates. Typically, even when facing questions that lie in the direct areas of competence of sociologists or political scientists, politicians and ordinary folk alike address them instead using just common sense or ideology. When discussing an issue of natural science, it is normal to defer to the relevant experts. By contrast, politicians – and for that matter lawyers, journalists, actors and sports personalities – are all too often happy to take their own unvarnished opinions as the first and last word on any matter of social science.

This point is, we think, well taken. Indeed the barb might be extended further to the many *academics* who, when straying beyond their own fields of competence, frequently end up in the realm of some social science. Nevertheless we judge the book only partially successful against its third target because its argument here relies crucially on the claim that social science is indeed useful, at least potentially, for policy. True enough, many of Steuer’s examples do show that it illuminates particular issues well beyond what is possible from the armchair or by reading the newspapers, but still the claim to policy relevance often does not hold

up. Steuer, as an experienced practitioner, is well aware of this problem and gives two responses (415): first, scientifically informed uncertainty is itself a valuable piece of knowledge, better than any other ground for policy choice. Second, greater attention to social science on the part of governments will itself tend to improve matters. Economics, Steuer claims, is a case in point. Since the mid-20th century, in the UK and US economists have played a prominent role in advising government on questions of economic policy. This involvement, Steuer thinks, has by itself spawned a wide range of applied work in many areas of the discipline, and he hopes that the same support of applied research can be given to other social sciences. These responses are interesting, although perhaps made rather quickly.

A more fundamental difficulty here though is not, we think, addressed adequately: just what methodologies will generate potentially applicable knowledge? Social science as illustrated in the book's six central chapters does not face the ignorant enemy as a united front. Rather, as noted earlier, the picture resembles instead an extremely diverse mixture of projects whose aims, standards and methodologies appear to bear little relation to one other. As a result, it is not left sufficiently clear what it is about social science that differentiates it from inferior alternatives. By itself diversity of methods and standards is not a vice, but it becomes so when it impedes our ability to detect and to integrate policy-relevant information. Perhaps in order to be heard by the public some consolidation of standards is required, or else an explicit articulation of just how the different methods each further a common goal. Steuer claims that for all social sciences the objective is the same (366), by which he must mean that all strive to provide the same kind of understanding. But in order to make the case for social science as a whole, this crucial point needs to be fleshed out. In particular, what is required is a more critical and rigorous analysis of when and why social science does and does not succeed.

A start would be to modify Steuer's conception of the goals of social science, since understanding via connecting explanations is far too vague a criterion. We mention one possible way of doing this here. Following JS Mill, one could focus on tendencies, i.e. the concrete causal forces that operate in the social world and that combine to make up social phenomena as we observe them. On this view, social science is the study of the identity and nature of these tendencies and the rules for their composition. Ideally, such knowledge then licenses successful policy intervention. Adopting such a picture would force social scientists to make more explicit how their different methods bear on this goal. Economists, for instance, regularly postulate tendencies in models but less often study how these tendencies are instantiated in the complex environments of the real world. Anthropologists, on the other hand, pay much attention to formulating the right categories for analyzing particular communities, but less to these categories' causal connections. Both can be seen as ways of approaching the study of tendencies.

The point is that a better conception of methodological goals may both improve social science and also make clearer the inadequacies of its rivals. To illustrate, a familiar complaint against rational choice theory is its practice of deriving causal relations from extremely idealized models and then claiming that *ceteris paribus* they obtain in reality. Although Steuer acknowledges the issue, he calls it only a “pretend problem” (42) by comparison to that of convincing policy-makers to take social science seriously. We disagree: to be taken seriously, rational choice theorists must show how tendencies in models relate to tendencies in the world. Only then can a persuasive case be made for heeding their advice over that of others.

Despite these problems, we hope that Steuer’s book will mark an important beginning. Given its lack of engagement with the philosophical literature it would be easy for philosophers to dismiss it, but we think this would be to ignore the fact that its virtues – principally, a wide knowledge of and hence feel for social science as it is actually practiced – are the very ones most lacking in that literature. An informed discussion of the nature of social science, what can be expected of it, how it can be improved and how to bring it to bear on policy-making, is badly needed. In particular, rather than yet another recounting of general metaphysical obstacles like multiple realizability, much more attention should be given instead to why social science sometimes *does* succeed and to the methodological problems that are actually pertinent ‘on the ground’. Steuer breaks the silence and one can only hope that the discussion will continue.

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