HOW DOES ONE STUDY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Joseph A. Schumpeter

Introductory Note: *The affinities between Schumpeter and Max Weber are evident in this lecture, parts of which present the arguments of Weber's famous essay "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy" (1904) in a more accessible form. But that only begins to suggest its interest. Written almost a century ago for an audience of non-professionals, this essay still provides an acute and remarkably contemporary introduction to students beginning to embark on a course of social scientific study. In editing it, I have retained Schumpeter's broader reflections, eliminating his dated recommendations for particular books to consult on various social -scientific disciplines.*

First delivered as a lecture in 1910, the essay was published under the title Wie studiert man Sozialwissenschaft? *(Czernowitz, 1910), then in an expanded second edition (Leipzig, 1915), and was reprinted in Joseph A. Schumpeter,* Aufsätze zur ökonomischen Theorie *ed. E. Schneider and S. Spiethoff (Tübingen, 1952). It is here translated into English for the first time.* Jerry Z. Muller

The question "Which direction for the social sciences?" is asked with great frequency and urgency. Why is that? After all, one doesn't hear physicists asking how to study physics. Their path is clear, leading through a well-wrought course of studies. That path has been carved by centuries of experience, and anyone can embark on it with relatively little individual variation. Why are things different in the domain of social science? In part because the social sciences are relatively young and have not secured an established place in the educational system. But also because the immediate, practical interest of social science attracts so many untrained newcomers, so that whatever beginnings of an established order have been made are washed away. Social science is young. For although people have thought about social matters since time immemorial, the domain of the social sciences has become a matter of scientific investigation largely in the last century and a half [i.e. since the mid-eighteenth century]. Even today, the course of studies in the social sciences has none of the systematic and finished quality of the natural sciences.

So the question, "How does one study social science?" is quite justified. But if one asks it, one must be prepared to follow the answers one might get. That means giving up the popular idea that one can embark upon social scientific matters without having acquired any previous knowledge, without providing oneself with tools, which demand serious work. Most people don't bother, and the result is that a good deal of social scientific literature has no scientific character whatsoever, and the ensuing general dilettantism leads to mistrust and disillusionment. It's understandable that a young science lacks the established system of concepts, division of labor, and generally acknowledged methods that the older sciences have developed over the centuries. But the situation is made worse by the practical interests that the social sciences arouse, the crown of thorns of popularity that they undoubtedly wear. They deal, after all, with us, with ourselves, with our fate, with hopes and fears that touch everyone and interest everybody, and so nowhere are laurels more cheaply bestowed. That is probably inevitable and will improve over time.

One must be clear then, that one cannot approach the problems of social science unequipped, and that the answers provided by politicians or laymen to social scientific questions should be accorded no greater significance than the medical advice of old wives' tales. It is easy to become convinced of the difficulties of provid-

ing answers to political questions; answers which one can really stick to, which do not lead immediately to contradictions and are not subject to embarrassingly obvious objections; answers, that is, that are not stamped by narrow prejudices or that do not vanish when one actually seeks to apply them; answers that do not fade away as quickly as the passing moods or observations that led us to come up with them in the first place. To provide an off-the-cuff answer to a question—such as the advisability of protective tariffs—on the basis of unanalyzed facts is as difficult as attacking a well-equipped foe unarmed, or as quarrying without tools.

Social science is the study of social processes: the science of what holds state and society together, of what determines the conduct and fate of individuals and social classes, in short, the science of man's social existence and development. To be able to directly convey this social process in all of its multiplicity would fulfill our greatest ambition, if only contemplating the course of human history would provide us with a direct explanation of it. But just as natural science cannot simply provide us with a single picture of our natural environment and cannot directly lead to the construction of such a picture, so one cannot aim at such a unified result in social science. Progress in natural science came about once we had learned to take apart and analyze the multiplicity of phenomena, that is to say, after the specialization of the natural sciences. The same holds true for social science.

The first discovery that one makes when one approaches social science is that the realm of social science too is divided up into many partial realms, with methods and contents that are fundamentally distinct from one another. There is, in principal, no social science—only individual social sciences. And these social sciences in no way form a unified structure or an organic whole. They each arose in response to some particular need, and they are in no way coordinated with one another. The sum of all scholarship does not form an organic whole. Individual disciplines often arise out of contingent questions, they develop through the influence of the students of some significant man, and are held together sometimes by a unity of method, sometimes by a similarity of content. The same happens with the individual social sciences. They did not arise through the logical division of some originally unified realm of knowledge; they arose by chance so to speak, from some particular problem or method which gave rise to an ever greater quantity of research, and finally came together in a way which demanded a specialized staff.

The oldest and most fully developed social science is political economy. Time and again, however, particular subdivisions of political economy grew so much that they acquired relative self-sufficiency; for example monetary theory, or the theory of international trade. In addition, the number of social scientific studies increased of matters which could not be explained by their economic aspects and which are relatively independent of economics. That came to be termed "sociology," defined as the theory of the mutual inter-action between individuals and between groups of individuals within the larger society. Here too, special areas have developed, for example the sociology of religion, the sociology of law (which is quite distinct from jurisprudence), group psychology, and so on. As soon as such a sub-discipline becomes independent, it develops new ways of looking at things, new sets of problems, a new system of concepts. A new generation of scholars is trained who have specialized in the sub-discipline and are more or less distant from other sub-disciplines. But it is precisely such people who add the most to the development of the sub-discipline. The best achievements, those that are really reliable and worth taking most seriously, are therefore not easily accessible to beginners, while easily accessible general surveys will only rarely prove equally satisfactory in every chapter. When reading an overview of some discipline, one can generally tell which areas the author has worked in himself and which not, where he is a master and where a student. This situation makes it difficult to provide a generally accessible introduction to a social science, and makes it impossible to find an easy one.

When people ask, "How does one study social science?" they often mean, "How can I find an easy way to understand the social sciences? How do I study social science quickly? How can I rapidly become conversant with their most important findings? How can I quickly become capable of joining the discussion?"... Now it is certainly possible to acquire an overview of some area of social science quite painlessly, just as it is possible in the natural sciences. But whereas one simply accepts the findings of the natural sciences, one should never forget that just reading some overview is not enough to be an active participant in social matters.

My purpose here is not to provide such an introduction to the *findings* of the social sciences, but rather an introduction to how they should be *studied*. In principle it is quite easy to define the procedure of the social sciences, and how to arrive at social scientific knowledge. The social sciences do the same as the natural sciences. They collect factual material and then attempt to discover regularities, that is, to order and analyze the material data.

That data falls into several categories. The first is the sum of daily experiences and observations that more or less everyone has at his disposal. We rarely gather these consciously, life gathers them for us. In part they are inherited, in that they are comprised of inherited thought patterns by virtue of which everyone knows, for example, that "to economize" means "to satisfy one's needs with the smallest outlay of energy." But insofar as such knowledge is not simply part of being born human, it slowly increases through our experience of life. That is one reason why a certain degree of life-experience is required to be a really successful social scientist, a requirement that doesn't apply to the natural sciences. To be sure, the basic social facts, such as the fact of social belonging, are often so elementary that one can understand them and their significance without much additional experience. But that is not always the case. To take one example: at least since Karl Marx, one finds it repeatedly asserted, even in scholarly works, that free competition creates "unreality" in commercial life, with the result that commodities of poor quality are produced. Countless facts confirm this claim, countless others contradict it. How valid it is cannot therefore be established by argument—for that one needs life experience and analytic perspective.

In addition to life experience, the other sources of data are history, ethnology, and statistics. These are sciences of their own with their own trained personnel. Their methods are sufficiently difficult to require specialization. And none of these sciences involve merely gathering facts, they also shape the material through their forms of presentation, and each of these disciplines is itself in search of regularities and causal connections. In so doing, historians, ethnologists, and statisticians step into the realm of social science.

When our material has been gathered for us by others, one might imagine that the methods of their disciplines are of no further interest to us. That is quite wrong. In fact, a certain understanding of these methods is necessary for independent work, indeed even for thorough study. There are three reasons for this. First and above all because the historian, the ethnologist and the statistician do not provide us with all that we need, and for the most part they do not provide the data in the form that we need it. That is why a good deal of the work of economic and social history has had to be done by economists; that is why sociologists have to undertake research trips of their own; and that is why economists and sociologists often have to obtain statistical data for themselves. They almost always have to re-arrange the material provided by history, ethnology and statistics, and combine it or compare it with other materials. That's especially so when it comes to statistics. The statistical bureaus of governments and organizations that publish their data often don't know what is significant, and so we have to distill out of their publications the facts that are of interest for us. That means that a proper appreciation of what historians, ethnologists, and statisticians have to tell us requires that we have some knowledge of the methods they use. Just as someone who really wants to understand a painting has to know something about painting technique, so we too have to understand the techniques by which the data has been gathered and grouped.

We have to provide a check on the work of historians, ethnologists and statisticians, because often we have reason to mistrust what they have provided. They don't merely *report* on what they find, they *shape* their findings as well, and by shaping their data they transform it as well. One cannot write about history without speaking of cause and effect, without emphasizing some factors and relegating others to the background. That is already a matter of social science. And insofar as the historian is untutored in economics and sociology, he can easily miss the mark, mistaking symptoms for causes, fortuitous coincidences for causal contexts. Often he emphasizes quite incidental matters and believes he has made some significant discovery. We therefore have to be able to see how he came to his conclusions. We have to be able to answer the questions "From where does he get that? What comes from his sources and what has he added?" And we can only do that when we understand something of his methods. We also need to know how the reports of the ethnologist came about. We have to pay careful attention, for example, to the number of observations on which a particular assertion rests. Such

caution holds especially for statistics, where the results obtained are often dependent on the method used to obtain them. Depending on the method chosen, one can often arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions. It is also essential to have knowledge of the sources and the methods of gathering data. Often statistical data have no more value than a set of arbitrary numbers, at other times they are absolutely precise. One has to know how to judge which is which. Never trust the data without examining it, especially because the applied statistical methods which have been used may be faulty....

Should one study social science by diving into such materials? No. For the unanalyzed facts are dumb. They are the result of many causes and many countervailing forces. They can be explained in very diverse ways. They are unmasterable as given. We need to consider them, divide them into their elements, and form a judgment regarding the function of each of these elements. That is to say, we must *analyze* and *isolate* the various sides of social phenomena. Only then can we begin to discover what is essential and what is incidental, only then does true scientific work that promises to produce valid knowledge begin.

It is not as if reading history, for example, is without value. It provides us with an intimate understanding of events that might reach well beyond the knowledge that we can strictly prove. It can also lead us to consider causal connections that we might otherwise overlook. But these are always of a concrete nature. We can grasp historically how the French Revolution, for example, grew out of the totality of social relations of the *ancien régime*. But when we want to know more—when we want to penetrate into the individual elements of these social circumstances—we quickly arrive at insurmountable difficulties. Were the ideas of the Enlightenment the effective *causes* or merely *symptoms* of the revolution that was occurring? Should the Revolution be understood as an essentially *economic* phenomenon or as an essentially *political* one? Did the state's finances lead to revolution or not? Historians answer such questions often enough, but they can never strictly prove their answers; their answers can at best have the character of a personal insight, of a personally perceived general impression. Virtually every historical argument can be easily contested. If the historian tells us, for example, he can prove from the sources that in every case political ideas determine the course of events, that proves nothing. Because what is reflected in the sources are the *expressed*, that is, even in the best case, the *conscious* motives of actions. But quite other phenomena may ultimately be behind those conscious, expressed motives. Neither can the comparison of a number of revolutions provide an exact conclusion. For in each individual case there is a mixture of the various elements that make up a "revolution," and in such varying degrees that we can almost never see how they causally affect one another. The concrete constellation of circumstances never repeats itself and therefore the concrete results are always different. At most, the historian can have an eye for the necessity of things, allowing him to accurately describe individual instances, when he *feels* what he cannot *prove*. That makes for greatness in a historian, but even then his judgments cannot have scientific reliability. They are more like the creation of an artist than the results of a scientist.

All of this might give the impression that there are no enduring truths in the realm of the social sciences. Historians and laymen do in fact incline to this view. Things change: in one country the introduction of protective tariffs are followed by economic flourishing, in another country, not. In one country free trade leads to collapse, in another to an economic upswing. In one country political freedom proves itself a success, leading to the highest cultural attainments; in another it fails and leads to social disorganization (compare, for example, England and Greece). Where are the lasting, general truths? The answer has already been indicated. Certainly the facts, as we perceive them in day to day reality, show only ongoing change. But the natural world around us also displays unending multiplicity. We would never arrive at conclusions were we to describe every individual stone that we have ever observed. We have to dissolve phenomena into their elements and consider each of these elements. Only then do we see the otherwise invisible regularities. So, too, in the social sciences.

That is called engaging in "theory." Only then, as we have said, does real social scientific work begin. The gathering of facts is only preliminary labor, although an absolutely necessary preliminary where the facts are not yet available. But even where the facts have been provided by other, independent branches of knowledge, there is a distinction. Economics (and to a lesser degree, sociology) rests in part on material that is sufficiently

secure that the emphasis of its study and research is on thinking things through conceptually.... Here there are scientific structures founded on a few grand elementary facts. In order to understand them, one has to learn to think theoretically, to develop a sense for scientific abstractions....

One must impress upon all beginners in the social sciences the importance of learning the *craft* of science. Otherwise one never gains real insight, but remains mired in dilettantism, which, while it may be quite entertaining, can never avoid elementary mistakes. The advantage of the scientific study of social phenomena is precisely that it teaches us to see with a sharper eye than would otherwise be possible. To engage in politics, science is as little necessary as that the extras who play the king's entourage on stage wear real diamonds and pearls (as Macaulay puts it). The politician needs success: he wants to move the masses. For that he needs short, absolute, and striking phrases. He is driven by necessity to display disdain for scientific knowledge—that is what his drive for self-preservation requires. We study social science precisely because we sense the frailty of those phrases. And we then have to learn the craft and technique of scholarship, for that is what distinguishes the conclusions of scholarship from the slogans we hear around us.

... Another thing that must be impressed upon the beginner is that the study of the social sciences demands a heavy sacrifice from us. At the threshold of social science, we must leave a piece of our selves behind, namely our social ideals, our opinions of what is good and desirable. No other science demands this sacrifice of us. Faced with the laws of nature, our wishes silence themselves. For whether we like it or not—the stone will always fall to earth. To the layman, it appears that things are entirely different when it comes to the social sciences. Social relations?—surely we can alter them easily, perhaps shape them according to our wishes. Here, therefore, is it not a matter of indifference if we support existing social relations or not? Certainly not. But one of most significant effects of study is that one grasps the necessities of social phenomena, that one sees that in the social realm too an inexorable logic rules which one ignores at one's peril. And one must understand the "what" and "why" of things before one intervenes in them. Science provides us with this "what" and "why." What lies beyond that varies from person to person. Everyone has his own social world, his own social ideals, everyone decides for himself what he worships and what he disdains. Here there are no exact arguments; here the realm of science stops. What we feel, what we value, perhaps no other man feels and values, and certainly all men do not share our feelings and values. How then can one make one's own wishes into the criteria of judgment? Science can give us foundations for our political judgment by helping us to understand the nature of the things that we want to judge. But the highest principles of judgment lie in regions that are not accessible to science.

While science cannot erect social ideals, the ideals that actually influence peoples in their social relations can indeed be objects of scientific research. What we cannot do is simply judge the ideals of those we study by our own. That is difficult: for unconsciously our social position, our experiences, and our interests influence our scientific work. We often judge matters from our standpoint without even being conscious of it. That is what laymen and politicians do. But we have to try to emancipate ourselves from this tyranny of our selves. We have to empathize with the motives of other people, with their position, their interests.

Another thing to keep in mind: Everyone understands the necessity of this sort of empathy to one degree or another. Few people who research the life circumstances of workers will fail to try to empathize with the worker's thoughts. But fewer people understand that it is just as necessary and difficult for the observer to empathize with the circumstances and thoughts of those social strata that stand *above* his social and economic level. This holds true even for professional social scientists, especially in the area of social policy. The scholar usually belongs to the middle class. He studies the worker and his circle with love and often arrives at an admirable, intimate understanding. But when it comes to viewing the heights of industrial society he brings no such sympathy, more often a narrow-minded aversion. He expends far less research and far less objectivity on discovering how *these* people think. Their income seems unjustifiably large to him, their style of life appears as immoral luxury. We are past the time when it was thought necessary to express moral condemnation over the cannibalistic mores of some African tribe. But the same moralizing propensity continues to reign

in science, even if it is in a more refined and less obvious form.

Let us emancipate ourselves from this. Let us keep apart science and politics, knowledge and wishes. Only when we do so do we approach problems in a scientific spirit, only then do we really get beyond dilettantism and popular slogans. That demands great spiritual discipline, which is only achieved with difficulty. If one has only practical goals, one never attains that spiritual discipline. But if one achieves that spiritual discipline, then one begins to approach closer to the truth about reality....

Let us turn to the study of theory. The first thing to keep in mind when studying theory is that theory can obviously never present a precise picture of reality. That is true in the natural sciences as well, and everyone understands this without being put off by it. The social sciences, by contrast, still have to struggle with the fact that laymen look to them for immediate answers to practical questions of social life. It lies in the nature of every science of a theoretical character that it takes the individual elements of the phenomenon with which it is concerned and tracks all of their consequences; at the same time, it makes assumptions which exclude the influence of other elements. In this sense one can say that the theoretical social sciences portray only *tendencies within* social reality, and never *complete* social reality. For example, they deal with economic action as if there were no other kinds of action. By that they do not assert that there *are* no other kinds of action. Similarly, I could say that every part of my body has a tendency to fall to the floor, which is not the same as asserting that I'm actually in the process of falling. Why is it that people do not object to such forms of expression in the natural sciences, but get very defensive about the same methods in the social sciences? It's simply a result of the fact that we are accustomed to such procedures in the natural sciences, which we take for granted, but which we are not yet accustomed to in the social sciences.

Here is another difficulty of which students of social science should become aware. The structure of every science changes over time, but eventually every science reaches a stage in which it establishes the working assumptions and the main conceptual approaches for all scientific work. That is not yet the case in the social sciences: their skeleton is still in the process of formation and alters rapidly; as a result, the approaches and assumptions change from decade to decade and vary from author to author in the same period. If one is not to be led astray, one must therefore ascertain the preconditions which lie behind a particular line of analysis, otherwise one might find seeming contradictions that don't in fact exist. Take, for example, the controversy over protective tariffs. Some authors conclude that free trade provides the optimal result possible under the circumstances for all nations between which it occurs. That is in fact not untrue, given a number of preconditions. But one can also come to the conclusion that under a different set of preconditions one or another nation might do better *with* protective tariffs. There is no contradiction here, as long as one can specify the relevant preconditions in each case: in fact it indicates knowledge, scientific results. To be sure, the lay person who is not used to abstract chains of thought sees only that our two imagined authors contradict one another, that one maintains that free trade is most advantageous, the other protective tariffs. But it is one of the most important goals in studying political science to get beyond this primitive situation and to emancipate oneself from the charges against social science that are made by the superficial. In the process, one comes to see that one cannot simply recommend free-trade or protective tariffs for every time and place, but also that one can quite satisfactorily determine their preconditions and consequences.

Lastly, let the beginner keep in mind that any particular theory is never valid in itself, but is always a part of a theoretical structure and can only be understood as such. One cannot grasp a particular proposition outside of its theoretical framework and discuss it as such. One has to understand it in its relationship to the other links of the chain to which it belongs. That is part of understanding theory. If a theory is really to offer us something worthwhile, we have to become accustomed to its chain of reasoning, as any physicist would take for granted. When one first reads a theoretical work, one will at first find half of it obvious and half of it incomprehensible. Only after a good deal of work do the individual arguments really begin to make sense to us and really begin to contribute to our understanding of reality. Only when we have become practiced in theory does the contemplation of social reality teach us something. Only then do the facts begin to speak to us.

On Joseph Schumpeter by Jerry Z. Muller: As readers of the major works of Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950) will know, he was a man of broad learning and trans-disciplinary interests. That range and depth was already evident in a series of works he produced by his early thirties, including a book on economic theory published in 1908, his path-breaking *Theory of Economic Development* of 1911, and a short book on the history and future of the social sciences published in 1915, *Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Sozialwissenschaften.* The latter book remains too little known; remarkable in its range and insight, it includes a deft analysis of the centrality of the Scottish Enlightenment in the development of modern social science. Like the essay translated above, it began as a lecture to an organization of social-scientifically interested amateurs in Czernowitz, a small university town at the eastern fringe of the Habsburg empire, where Schumpeter taught from 1909 to 1911. A few years later, he would join Max Weber on the editorial board of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik,* in its day perhaps the most significant journal of social science in the world.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Allen, Robert Loring. *Opening Doors: The Life and Work of Joseph Schumpeter*, two volumes. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction, 1991.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Sozialwissenschaften.* Munich and Leipzig, 1915.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *The Economics and Sociology of Capitalism*, ed. Richard Swedberg. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Jerry Z. Muller is professor of history at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and author, most recently, of The Mind and the Market: Capitalism in Modern European Thought.