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A defense of objectivity in the social sciences, rightly understood

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I mount a defense of objectivity as a fitting and necessary norm for the conduct of social scientific research. A number of social scientists and philosophers have criticized this norm because it seems to call for disinterested investigations that are free from any kind of evaluative judgments and seems overwhelmingly to favor quantitative research. I argue that these criteria are inappropriately used as guidelines for objectivity. Researchers can comply with the norm of objectivity, rightly understood, and still be interested observers, make value judgments in relation to their research, and conduct qualitative studies. I argue instead that the norm of objectivity refers to a set of guidelines for interpreting and reporting on research that views this reporting as an intelligible, reasonable, and inherently reciprocating, public activity. By implication these norms also establish correlative guidelines for gathering and analyzing research information. Briefly, as investigators social scientists are called upon honestly to represent our research, to use measures and terms of references that allow for comparisons and verifications by our audiences, and to exercise responsible judgments. I conclude that my account of objectivity is consistent with Weber's defense of this norm more than a century ago.

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Introduction

In this article, I mount a defense of objectivity as a fitting, necessary, and vital norm for the conduct of social scientific research. I undertake this task because the norm of objectivity has been roundly criticized by a number of social scientists. They have criticized this standard because they assume it calls for them to undertake disinterested investigations that are free from any kind of evaluative judgments. Moreover, they assert, this standard seems overwhelmingly to favor very precise if not quantitative research. I demonstrate how and why these criteria are inappropriately used as guidelines for objectivity. Researchers can comply with the norm of objectivity, rightly understood, and still be interested observers, make value judgments in relation to their research, and conduct qualitative studies.

Preeminently, the norm of objectivity refers to a set of guidelines for the gathering, interpreting, and reporting on research which views this reporting as an intelligible, reasonable, discursive, and inherently reciprocating, public activity. The opposite of objective reporting, understood in these terms, is private, privileged, impressionistic, and non-discussable or non-debatable communicating. Reports lack objectivity, rightly understood, if they cannot be freely,

intelligently, and reasonably discussed and debated both by supporters and critics, colleagues and strangers. In order to be able to prepare accounts of their investigations that allow for these kinds of rational public debates, social scientists are expected to comply with several other guidelines for how they gather and interpret their data. Briefly, these guidelines are as follows: investigators are called upon honestly to represent their research, they are to use measures and terms of references that allow for comparisons and verifications by their audiences, and they must exercise responsible judgments.

Although the approach to objectivity that I am defending may seem new and unorthodox, a strong case can be made for arguing quite the opposite. In fact, I end this article by arguing that in broad outline the position defended here was first set forth in Weber's classic essay on objectivity which he wrote in 1905.

A critique of objectivity, wrongly understood

Many social scientists have criticized the norm of objectivity as neither a possible nor desirable standard for social scientific scholarship. The utilization of this standard has been variously associated with

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insensitive and impersonal detachment, with a narrow focus on quantitative measures and/or experimental methods which can be mechanically replicated, with attempts accurately to depict the social world as it really is apart from any perspective, and with the endeavor to arrive at universal and invariant truths. Smith (1976) objected to the norm of objectivity because, he argued, it encouraged social scientists to treat people as objects, stringently constricted understanding of others, and fostered narrowly disciplinary inquiries. Feyerabend (1987) has argued simply that there are no objective truths. After analyzing several scientific claims, Rorty (1980, 385) has concluded “‘objective truth’ is no more than and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on.” As she commented on her anthropological studies of Tamil families, Trawick (1992, 2) confessed, “I have not attempted to be ‘objective’ in the common-sense of this term. I have never pretended to be disinterested or uninvolved in the lives of my informants and I have never set my feelings aside.”

In the following paragraphs, I examine a number of quite different criticisms of objectivity as a standard for social scientific research and reporting. I argue that most of these criticisms are relevant and weighty but that in a fundamental sense they miss the mark. They criticize beliefs and practices which are frequently but, I argue, mistakenly treated as criteria or exemplification of the norm of objectivity.

It is wrongly assumed that objectivity calls for detached, impersonal, judgment-free research and reporting

Many people assume that social scientific accounts are objective to the extent that they could and would be the same no matter who rendered them. They assume that objective accounts were ones that viewed others from no one particular perspective and that correspondingly viewed social phenomena just as they are or were. Objective descriptions and explanations correspondingly are assumed to be in principle impersonal. They are expected to be developed without reference to any particular concerns, judgments, or commitments. From this perspective social scientists are viewed as passive collectors and organizers of data. Their competence is judged by their capacity to see clearly, to order their material simply but comprehensively, and to transmit their findings articulately.

The German historian von Ranke (1956, 57) argued that historical research ought to be conducted precisely in this way. He maintained that the job of the historian was to describe events exactly as they actually happened, almost as it were from the

eye of God. Histories were written neither to judge the past nor to instruct the future. “The strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive though they may be, is undoubtedly the supreme law.” The job of historians was to describe and account for specific events: it was not to abstract from these details in order to make philosophical arguments. By these remarks von Ranke clearly aimed to criticize the broad schematization of historical information, undertaken by people like Hegel in order to advance particular philosophical arguments.

A strong case can be made for asserting that social scientists ought not distort evidence in order to champion partisan causes. Their commitment to truthful presentation requires that they communicate representative data, calling attention especially to uncomfortable, unexpected, and “inconvenient facts” (Weber 1958, 147). They are expected to be on guard against the ever-present tendency to select as representative data, information that confirms their own biases and reinforces their own political and philosophical agendas. Because social life is complex and societies are enormously varied, we do not ordinarily expect all the data cited by social analysts to support either the explanatory arguments or evaluative judgments they make. We become suspicious that some relevant evidence is being overlooked or suppressed whenever social scientific accounts only cite evidence which supports or confirms the arguments being made.

However, the advocates of impersonal, detached, judgment-free social science make two critical but debatable assumptions: they assume, first, that truthful accounts of human interactions are only possible by eliminating personal judgment and, second, that it is possible to conduct research in this manner. Both of these assumptions are questionable. There are several procedures, associated with a revised standard of objectivity, that serve to reduce and limit distortion. Data do not select and organize themselves. In at least three different ways observers typically exercise personal judgments with respect to their accounts of human interactions. The failure to recognize the role of personal judgment, and therefore to exercise this judgment responsibly results, I argue, in unwitting and unacknowledged distortions.

First, social scientists must determine what data are truly representative. We must correspondingly develop an educated sense of quite complex phenomena if we are to choose wisely. Inevitably, as we choose, we are interpreting which sorts of data are most characteristic. To make these judgments wisely, we must be able to weigh various accounts and interpretations offered by both contemporaries and subsequent observers. We must be able to both

discount and yet to respect as useful, informative, and perhaps true, the views embodied in conventional wisdom. We must be prepared to show why we have selected the data we have as truly representative (Carr 1961). The role of the observer cannot accurately be described as a passive data-gathering and sorting activity. As we select representative data, observers must necessarily actively exercise their judgments in a number of different ways. There are no ever-reliant formulae that can be utilized always to identify and organize the most representative data. Considered personal judgment must be exercised. It is self-deceptive to assume that we can gather data without making these kinds of judgments.

Second, social scientists exercise personal judgment as we determine both how to consider the data at hand and the fitting ways to conceptualize what we observe. We necessarily make our observations from somewhere and some time. Moreover, we report on our observations to educated contemporaries who, except in rare instances, do not inhabit the same social space and time as those whom we are observing. Social scientists inevitably bring to their observations the concerns, questions, and preoccupations of our own social and historical settings. When we look at past historical events, we do so inherently in ways that differ from those in the past who did not know the outcome of these events. Correspondingly, our choice of representative data is influenced by the debates of our contemporaries and by the assumptions and conceptual frameworks they utilize. Written histories, Benedetto Croce argued, characteristically embody contemporary thought about the past (Croce 1921; Collingwood 1956). Similarly, social scientific accounts embody the perceptions, reflections, and analyses that seem insightful, clarifying, and explanatory to observers based on contemporary views regarding both fittings ways to conduct social scientific inquiries and plausible variations of human conduct. It has sometimes been argued that every generation needs to write new histories of the past. This counsel is not primarily based on the assumption that each generation will discover new evidence about the past but on the assumption that contemporaries will raise different questions and analyze data in relation to new hypotheses. The situation of social scientific research is similar. As Geertz (1985, Chap. 6) has noted, although we write in order to describe and explain what it is like for particular humans to “live there” as the subjects of our studies, we inevitably write as authors who “live here” and are primarily concerned to communicate with other scholars and contemporaries.

Finally, social scientists characteristically focus our studies in relation to what interests us. We turn our investigations on particular phenomena rather than others because these subject matters engage our interests and because researching these topics serve as means of addressing questions we choose to explore. Weber (1949a) argued that social scientists inherently pursue our studies in relation to what he referred to as value references: that is, some particular clusters of beliefs, commitments, and interests which influence both the direction and character of our research. These value references inevitably influence the kinds of questions observers ask, the direction we focus our attention, the way we identify representative data, and manner in which we report on our findings. Weber criticized those social scientists who failed to acknowledge their value-influenced interests. Typically they buried their value judgments in the way they organized and presented their data.

Because veracity is important in social scientific work, it is therefore necessary for observers honestly to acknowledge the degree to which we inevitably must exercise personal judgments as we gather and report on our research. The issue is not whether to exercise personal judgment but how to do so in ways that do not result in distorted accounts. Objectivity, rightly understood, calls for the attempt to conduct research not without making personal judgments but for the making of these judgments responsibly, overtly, and publicly. In the name of what they refer to as “reflexivity,” some contemporary anthropologists deliberately include in their accounts of others their own personal accounts of how they arrived at their own observational judgments.

It is wrongly assumed that objectivity calls for the disinterested observations that discount the un-reflected views of subjects themselves

Many people assume that those conducting reliable, objective research should not be influenced in their accounts by those whom they are studying. It is often assumed that observers are likely to err in our judgments of what is really taking place if we allow ourselves to empathize or identify excessively with our subjects or if we allow ourselves to rely too heavily on their explanations and descriptions. Furthermore, many scholars have assumed that it was possible to comprehend the beliefs and even norms of others simply by observing how they act. Scott (1971) has argued that it is possible to comprehend and account for the moral commitments of people by analyzing only their actual conduct. He maintained verbal accounts of these commitments

were without significance if they did not result in corresponding actions.

Many scholars, like Scott, assume that the accounts by subjects themselves are likely to be misleading or unreliable. For example, many people assume that day-to-day occurrences are often influenced by the actions of gods or spirits or by the exercise of magic. Many people explain their circumstances by invoking the influence of these kinds of empirically unobservable realities. For the most part social scientists remain in principle agnostic with respect to such explanations. Correspondingly, many social scientists believe that we must either ignore these kinds of accounts by the actors themselves or treat them as essentially unreliable. At a more mundane level, social scientists are often trained to treat the accounts of our subjects with some suspicion: Subjects are, after all, likely to recite official explanations for their behavior, to bend or select information in ways that are personally self-serving, or to tell researchers what they think the latter are expecting to hear.

Nonetheless, if we are to treat our subjects seriously and without bias, then we cannot really ignore and dismiss the latter's accounts. We are expected to represent our subjects reliably and faithfully in ways that make sense to our audiences. The accounts by subjects of their own conduct are integral features of their own self-presentations. It is part of the reality that needs to be understood, interpreted, and explained. Social scientists are guilty of excessive reductionism to the extent that they ignore or dismiss these accounts. The accounts which actors offer of their conduct are integral to their overall social reality in several ways: These accounts reflect the intentions with which people act, the rhetoric by which they seek to persuade others to cooperate in their interactions, and the reasons and excuses they offer to justify how things turn out. These accounts constitute a significant part of the communicative activity in relation to which people initiate, manage, explain, modify, and make sense of their interactions. As cultural beings, these communications constitute a distinguishable dimension of human interactions (Geertz 1973, Chaps. 1, 2). These accounts are not necessarily less real or less important when their corresponding conduct fails strictly to comply (Geertz 1973, Chap. 6). Some degree of discrepancy ordinarily occurs either because people are learning or because they forget, backslide, or seek to honor at the same time partially conflicting standards (Bird 1996, Chap. 1). Discrepancies may occur as well simply because actors treat their statements as symbolic rather than strict accounts. Idealists and behaviorists misrepresent human interactions to the degree that they

both, although for different reasons, assume a strict correspondence between vocalized accounts and actions and thereby overlook or discount as insignificant any instance of behavior or any statements that seem discrepant.

The accounts offered by subjects form part of their reality. Observers are well warned to look at these accounts both appreciatively and critically. We may personally judge that many of the accounts of subjects function primarily as self-serving excuses, ideological defenses, or unreflected stock answers. In any case, these accounts do not constitute strict or definitive descriptions and explanations of the behavior of subjects if for no other reasons than that they are voiced characteristically to elicit support, defend actions, make sense, and/or express feelings. They represent first-order interpretations. Correspondingly, Giddens (1976), echoing a counsel made earlier by Weber (1978, 1–3), has argued that the interpretations of human interactions by social scientists represent second-order interpretations, which must necessarily first examine and account for the interpretations offered by actors themselves.

Observers need not agree with the accounts of subjects in order to take them seriously. There are a wide range of options between simply ignoring and discounting them at one extreme and treating them as scientifically valid descriptions and explanations at the other. In an appreciative yet critical response to Bellah's analysis of reductionism, Robbins, Anthony, and Curtis (1973) and Anthony, Robbins, and Curtis (1974) argued that if observers were genuinely sympathetic to the accounts of their subjects then they must in some degree concur with them. Otherwise in some measure they were not taking these accounts seriously enough. If as observers we are to represent the reality of others reliably than what is minimally required of us is to be genuinely interested in and attentive to accounts of our subjects. We need not be sympathetic; nor do we need to agree with these accounts. Rather, we need to be attentive and interested enough so that we can comprehend how our subjects present themselves and how they make sense of their lives in their own terms.

It is wrongly assumed that objectivity calls social scientists accurately to reflect the world simply as it is

Social scientists, like natural scientists, are expected not to make up the world they observe. One of the purposes of all the sciences has been to help people to obtain more reliable ways of understanding the reality of our own lives and the external world about us. The sciences have doggedly attempted to

overcome ignorance – so we know about the past and present it as it really is; to expose error and illusion – so that our information is reliable and well-informed; and to overcome confusion – so that we comprehend clearly. Many scientist have, therefore, attempted to depict things as they really are. They have discovered how conception really occurs and how diseases spread; they have provided clearer and fuller and more accurate accounts of the past; they have provided more knowledgeable and explanatory analyses of human psychologies; they have mapped the lands and oceans as well as the varied patterns of human interactions. As they have proceeded with their work, scientists have repeatedly had to demonstrate how their accounts were more reliable than those provided heretofore by legends, common sense, conventional wisdom, popular myths, traditional folklore, and even, and often especially, historically earlier forms of science. They have argued that many of the spectacles through which people have been accustomed to view reality provide distorted and unreliable accounts. Moreover, sometime these accounts also served to benefit or privilege some people – priests, shamans, upper classes, rulers, dominant ethnic groups, speculators – more than others.

The Copernican account of the relation of the Earth to the sun and other planets and stars provides a good example of this aim of science to provide more reliable accounts by discovering more accurate representations. The previous Ptolemaic account of the movement of heavenly bodies provided a set of spectacles which could predict the changing positions of the sun, stars, and planets fairly well so long a number of exceptions were allowed. This ancient model had the advantage, not enjoyed by the later Copernican model, of being able to explain and predict these things from the perspective of the Earth-dwelling viewers. However, its accounts were more complex and less reliable, and required or allowed for more exceptions. Moreover, from the perspective of the new science, the Ptolemaic accounts were also blatantly inaccurate. They may have been able loosely to account for how things appeared or seemed to be to those who had not thoughtfully considered these matters. They did not account for how things really were. Their predictions were less accurate.

Social scientists have attempted to develop models of society that seemed to possess the same kind of accuracy, predictive power, and reliability. Durkheim (1982 [1895]) viewed the social sciences as simply a natural science of society. As he introduced *Capital*, Marx (1906, 14) asserted that he proposed to set forth in this work “the economic law of motion of modern society.” He attempted to analyze

what he regarded as the actual working of economic relations beneath and behind the apparent interactions as superficially described by the classical economists. Other social scientists have attempted to develop accurate, reliable, but not always predictive accounts of indigenous peoples, privileged classes, human growth, inequality, prejudice, and many other human phenomena. They have attempted to overcome human ignorance and misconception by showing the degradation of the poor, the discrimination against women, the rationality of inner worldly, ascetic religious movements, and the underdevelopment fostered indirectly by economic development.

As part of their efforts to depict the natural and social cosmos more reliably, the natural and social sciences have developed concepts and frames of reference to identify, classify, and organize their perceptions and make their explanations. For the most part, they have assumed that these concepts and frames of reference were more reliable, better at helping to make data intelligible, and more reliable at predicting future outcomes. Many often assumed as well that their concepts, models, and theorems worked better because they more accurately reflected realities as they in fact existed. The best concepts and frames of reference were presumed to function like reflecting mirrors that depicted reality as it was without distortion. To be objective was to depict the world like mirrors might.

This view of science has been criticized from a number of different perspectives. After having carefully examined the work of natural scientists, Polanyi (1962 [1958]) has argued that they frequently chose a particular conceptual framework rather than alternatives not simply because it more closely reflected reality. Other considerations typically come into play as well. Scientists adopt particular conceptual frameworks because they provide more economical explanations, because they seem more elegant and intellectually harmonious, because they seem more profound, and because they seem to offer more opportunities for the scientists to carry on their work. From an historical perspective Kuhn (1962) has argued that the choice of conceptual models has been typically influenced by current judgments by other scientists regarding problem-posing and problem-solving abilities of these models. Rorty (1980) has argued that scientists adopt particular conceptual frames not primarily or not exclusively because they closely reflect nature but because in pragmatic ways they enable scientists to offer credible explanations, conduct experiments, make predictions, and carry on intelligible discussions. Even earlier this century Simmel (1977) made a parallel argument with regard to the historical

sciences. He argued that these sciences did not, and could not, simply provide mirror images of events as they really happened. The social scientists inevitably used terms and concepts not employed by their subjects, acted upon knowledge which subjects often did not possess, and necessarily had to focus on only some aspects of the infinitely more complex reality experienced by their subjects.

Social scientists have often been able to identify patterns and regularities in the interactions of their subjects. They have been able to discern what seem to be consistent structures in varied kinship patterns, modes of production, sibling relations, and language usage. Social scientists are, nonetheless, well cautioned to acknowledge that regularity of conduct does not necessarily imply that corresponding actions are governed by the rules or principles either named by subjects or discerned by observers. No matter how patterned or how predictable, human actions remained willed and contingent. Generalizations remain useful heuristic guides. Those who treat them as immanent and effective laws of action err. Criticizing structuralists like Levi-Strauss and Chomsky, Bourdieu (1990) writes, “objectivist discourse tends to constitute the model constructed to account for practices as a power really capable of determining them...it treats its constructions – ‘culture,’ ‘structures,’ ‘social class,’ or ‘modes of production’ – as realities endowed with social efficacy.”

Whenever we think that the concepts we use to perceive, order, and explain our observations also simply and accurately mirror reality, we become guilty of what Whitehead (1925, 52–59) referred to as the “The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.” He noted that we cannot think without abstractions. Moreover, over time scientists and philosophers have been able to develop abstract concepts, principles, and theorems which have enabled them to comprehend our cosmos more fully and with greater clarity so that they could explain in ways that are empirically verifiable and predict with higher degrees of probability. Using abstractions, we have been able to apprehend and account for ordered patterns in both the natural and social worlds. The development of clear and useful concepts has been one of the great tools for scientific discovery (Weber 1958, 141). However, these concepts remain simply lenses by means of which we can gain understanding and offer explanations. They are not mirrors of these realities. They are not exact symbolic equivalents of observed phenomena. Whenever we mistake our conceptual frames for the realities we wish to analyze, then we are likely in several ways to miscomprehend and misrepresent those realities: we are likely to oversimplify, to

overlook the experience of contingency, and to treat our predictions more as certainties than probabilities. We are additionally likely to presume mistakenly that ordered relations among concepts and theorems necessarily refer to equivalent ordered realities in observed realities. We are especially likely to gather and organize our observations into category baskets or frames determined by our concepts. For the most part, in the social sciences at least, concepts ought to be treated as heuristic or analytic devices employed not to classify and name realities in themselves but as more or less useful means for making sense of observed realities: for comprehending their character and changes, for understanding their interactions, and for explaining their development.

It is wrongly assumed that objectivity requires us to use terms of reference that are not only clear but also precisely measurable

Both the natural and social sciences have been concerned to identify, to describe, and to explain phenomena as clearly and accurately as possible. They have insisted on clear, useable measures. They have strived to limit and overcome the utilization of vague impressions and un-gaugeable measures. They have shown how the latter foster confusion, reinforce uncritical prejudices, and make explanations difficult. More importantly, to the degree that scientists report on their observations using vague and unmeasurable frames of reference, then it is often never very clear whether they are discussing the same or equivalent realities. Popular, customary, and commonsense accounts are often notoriously hazy and approximate. Observers may in fact utilize imprecise terms capable of multiple interpretations not only in order to avoid being pinned down but also because they engage in communications primarily to evoke common and shared feelings rather than discriminate analysis (Bernstein 1971).

Scientists have developed clear and gaugeable conceptual frameworks for two basic reasons. First, they are committed to producing studies which are potentially verifiable independently by other observers. Independent observers cannot verify points of view, opinions, and vaguely expressed impressions. Second, scientists are committed to producing results that allow for reasonable comparisons. They seek to demonstrate how particular phenomena are more or less similar and dissimilar with other phenomena and in what ways. Phenomena, however, can only be compared in relation to frames of reference which are set forth clearly enough so that observers can both gauge the closeness or distance of similarities and differences as well as identify the

ways phenomena are often at once truly unique and yet part of larger classes or groupings of similar phenomena

Many social scientists have presumed that clear, comparable, and gaugeable conceptual frames must be capable of being either stated in numerical terms and intervals or used precisely not just approximately. Many regard quantifiable research not only as more exacting and more easily replicable but also in some sense fundamentally more objective and more scientific. So-called qualitative research is correspondingly viewed as being not only more impressionistic and less precisely demonstrated but also less objective and less scientific. Some social scientists regard qualitative research as a kind of storytelling: it produces narratives which are interesting and sometimes illuminating but evidence that cannot be verified or falsified or rigorously compared. As they engage in “qualitative” research, social scientists may, so these critics argue, write rich, incisive ethnographies and interesting but speculative social analyses. They do not produce, so the advocates of a more precise or quantifiable approach contend, genuine, objective, verifiable, and comparable studies.

These critics can in turn be criticized on two grounds. First, they adopt overly narrow criteria for clear and gaugeable conceptual frames. In this case, they can be criticized not so much for what they advocate but for what they criticize. They can and ought to be criticized for the ways they have attempted to discredit studies that use clear and gaugeable measures which do not happen to use precise or numeric increments. Clear and gaugeable terms of reference need not be quantifiable and precise in order to allow for verification and comparison. Social scientists have developed a large repertoire of such terms, referring to phenomena as diverse as economic classes, status groups, ethnic communities, combined families, lineage groups, different types of bureaucratic organizations, cognitive dissonance, relative deprivation, reference groups, and so forth. Particular observers often define these terms differently because they maintain that certain understandings of these terms are more appropriate. Nonetheless, they do indicate how they use these terms. More importantly, if the terms are defined and used clearly then it is frequently possible to gauge degrees of approximation using fitting and clearly identified intervals. Social scientists have, for example, devised sets of usable and comparable terms to identify different family patterns and different types of religious associations. It has proven useful, for example, to compare forms of authority in the basis of whether they are legitimated more or less with reference to traditions, reason, or charisma

(Weber 1978). It has proven useful to distinguish a range of personal interactions on the basis of whether they were primarily enacted front stage in relation to strangers or publics or back stage in relation to intimates (Goffman 1959). It has proven helpful to distinguish between the use of elaborated and restricted speech codes (Bernstein 1971). These conceptual frames allow observers to make comparisons and to invite independent observers to verify or not verify their results.

First, sometimes those using numeric scales produces results that are in fact as approximate as the qualitative research many of them criticize. Data produced by survey research may be approximate rather than precise in two ways. It may, in the first place, set precise numerical values for what can at best be described as the hazy or unclear attitudes and perceptions of their respondents. Respondents indicate their approximate views, which are then assigned numeric values using scaling frameworks. The results may correspondingly give a sense of greater precision than in fact exists. In the second place, the correlation discovered among the indicators provide evidence of probabilities, which although they are statistically significant, often remain weak in terms of predicting outcomes with unvarying certainty.

Second, there is another more fundamental criticism of the overreliance on numeric and precise conceptual frames in the social sciences. The overreliance on these types of conceptual frames often leads observers to overlook much of what is really interesting and significant about human interactions. By focusing attention only on those aspects of phenomena that can be precisely measured or quantified, social scientists are prone to ignore or misapprehend features not susceptible to these kinds of observations. They may rely excessively on demographic and economic indicators and consequently overlook changes in beliefs, private rituals, and personal habits, not so precisely scaled and calculated. They may excessively rely on questionnaire surveys that only allow for standardized responses to researchers' questions rather for explorations of subjects' own self-understandings.

As a norm for the practice of the social sciences, objectivity has been criticized or rejected in part because it has been inappropriately associated with one or more of the four criteria which I have reviewed in the preceding paragraphs. Many people have criticized objectivity because they assumed, wrongly I think, that the norm called for following practices: first, reviewing and assessing data impersonally, without perspective, and without exercising any personal judgment; second, reviewing data without interest and discounting the views of actors

themselves; third, utilizing terms and concepts that accurately mirror social realities; and, finally, utilizing terms and measures that are precise and quantifiable.

Each of these standards can be criticized as inappropriate criteria for the norm of objectivity. However, these criticisms take different forms in each case. I have argued, for example, that it is impossible to review data impersonally without perspective or judgments and it is impossible to devise conceptual frames that simply and accurately mirror social realities. In contrast, it is possible to gather data impersonally without regard to subjects' own accounts. Still, it can be argued that such observations are less than truly objective because they fail to reflect the actual experiences of actors and to respect them as others on their own terms. Moreover, they treat subjects not as agents capable of discretion but merely as objects of their observations. It is also possible to gather and report on social realities, using only precise and quantifiable measures. However, if observations are restricted to the use of these kinds of measures, then many areas of social reality are likely to be overlooked and treated as inappropriate objects for social scientific research. Additionally, otherwise verifiable and comparable studies will be wrongly discounted and dismissed as being simply personal narratives and observations. Moreover, the approximate and probabilistic character of research using numeric and precise terms of reference is likely to be overlooked. Correspondingly, there are good reasons for questioning or criticizing the norm of objectivity so long as it assumed that this norm is defined by these criteria.

A defense of objectivity, rightly understood

The word objectivity identifies a set of normative guidelines for the practice of the social sciences. Whether these guidelines are realizable and worthy depends upon how we define and understand these norms. I will now attempt in a constructive way to define and defend those standards which, I argue, are central to the norm of objectivity.

The social sciences involve the gathering, organizing, interpreting, and reporting on observations of human interactions. The norm of objectivity preeminently sets standards for how observers are expected to report on their observations. In the process, and as a direct consequence, the norm of objectivity establishes guidelines as well for how data ought to be gathered, organized, and interpreted. The same general observations about the norm of objectivity can be restated by noting that objectivity in the first place is a civic virtue that

establishes normative expectations on how social scientists communicate our observations. However, as it establishes these communicative norms, it also by implication establishes normative standards for conducting, organizing, and interpreting research observations.

Objectivity calls for public accounts

Briefly, in the first place the norm of objectivity calls for social scientists to make public accounts of our observations. Harris (1992, 153) writes, "Science and scientific methodology are essentially public." Scientific accounts are public, and thereby objective, to the degree that they are written or orally delivered to people who share different as well as similar political, ideological, and moral views, to critics as well as supporters, to participants as well as those not involved, to strangers as well as colleagues. Social scientific reports are public, and thereby objective, to the degree that they welcome and seek out critical review. As the authors of public reports, social scientists invite our audiences to consider and reflect on our accounts, to review our data and constructions, and to reach their own conclusions not on the basis of the reputé, position, political philosophy, or social commitment of the authors but on the basis of their own reasoned review and judgment.

Who constitutes the audiences for these public reports? What kind of public is presumed? Clearly, social scientific accounts are not written for everyone. Because they typically assume the form of learned treatises, they are not addressed to those who are not in position to consider or review their evidence and accounts. In principle then the public presupposed by these accounts includes anyone willing and able to read or listen to them, to review their findings and theoretic assumptions, and to prepare reasoned responses.

Accounts are less than public, and thereby less than objective, if they are essentially private or privileged. In many settings, people communicate accounts of social phenomena primarily to voice points of view, to rally political support, to reinforce communal feelings, and/or to support value commitments. Many reports of social phenomena assume the form of sermons to the converted. One of the characteristics of private and privileged communication is that speakers and their audiences take for granted the existence of a range of common assumptions including their commitment to shared values and beliefs. They do not necessarily expect nor do they usually welcome sharp, reasoned criticism except from those who they regard as either ideological opponents or simply uninformed.

Typically, they presume that they do not have to demonstrate fully their positions because their audiences are already sympathetic. In this way, their accounts often become foreshortened: they point to some but not all evidence; often they over-select from confirming data; frequently they develop parts but not all of their arguments; in many instances they allude to or invoke but do not fully explain and defend their assumptions.

Private and privileged accounts typically are at least initially unintelligible to outsiders. They represent closed language games, which are largely incomprehensible to those not immediately involved (Wittgenstein 1958, I: 256, 258, 293). These accounts may seem illuminating and inspired to group members: homilies typically are for parishioners, just as political rhetoric is for partisans, testimonials are for fellow congregants, and colloquialisms are for folk groups. Nonetheless, private and privileged communication is by its nature not addressed to critics, to strangers, and to those who in principle remain unsympathetic. Public accounts are by nature addressed to all these groupings.

Polanyi (1958, Chap. 7) has argued that scientific research was in practice a convivial enterprise. By this he meant that as researchers investigated, experimented, analyzed, explained, and interpreted data, they did so always with the recognition that they would share what they learned with any other researchers who were interested. Our adherence as scientists to the truth implies, Polanyi maintained, our adherence as well to a larger community of scholars whom we trust to respect the truth. Correspondingly, as scholars our commitment to truth entails as well a commitment to free and open communication. This is the civic coefficient of our intellectual passions.

Recognizing that it is possible for us to err in our judgments and to misperceive in our observations, the norm of objectivity serves as self-correcting procedures. By giving public accounts, we invite others to be on the lookout for what we might overlook or misconstrue. Our objectivity is thus guaranteed by the civic or public character of our reporting and on our corresponding disposition to attempt to learn from our critics (Lonergan 1957, 290).

The commitment to providing public accounts entails a corresponding commitment to a set of norms about, first, how to prepare and deliver these accounts and, second, how to undertake the investigations on which they are based. It is important to observe that, given these commitments to certain core normative standards, genuinely public accounts either presuppose or allow for a number of differing views regarding defensible ontological assumptions, credible epistemological beliefs, valid modes of

reasoning, and justifiable cultural values. So long as observers can produce evidence and arguments which can be publicly examined and debated, they may in principle hold a variety of intellectual, moral, and logical views. From time to time, orthodoxies emerge within particular scientific disciplines about appropriate ways to conduct investigations, about the degrees to which accounts ought to be personal or impersonal, or about the saliency of economic or gender or psychological variables. Consensus develops around particular paradigms of the fitting way to conduct, theoretically organize, and report on research (Kuhn 1962). However, insofar as social scientific accounts are genuinely public in principle no orthodoxies can be regarded as sacrosanct and no dominant paradigms can be simply taken for granted. The commitment to public accounts entails a corresponding allowance for, or presupposition of, multiple ways of gathering and making sense of empirical investigations.

The allowance for diversity in method and argument brings with it as well a recognition that the discussions of scientific accounts are in principle open-ended. No particular set of epistemological rules can claim exclusive jurisdiction (Rorty 1980, 316). No empirical judgments are beyond question or possible revision. New observers may be able to bring new light on old topics. No particular methodologies, theoretical assumptions, or forms of reasoning are inherently or necessarily superior. In the end, what are decisive are the best arguments (Habermas 1984, Chap. 1).

If accounts and their discussion are to be genuinely public, then it is inappropriate to foreclose debate or to rule out any reasoned responses or informed inquiry. Debates and discussions have from time to time been arbitrarily cut short by political, academic, or professional authorities. They have as well been foreshortened and constricted at times by academic, disciplinary, and publication biases and predilections about favored subjects of inquiry, expected forms of data-gathering, and preferred formats for reporting. Intellectual fads and trends in what amounts to conventional wisdom within scholarly communities have at times been as constricting as formal authorities on the open-ended character of scientific inquiry. There should be no restraints on how researchers report on our investigations and critique those of others except for those that allow and protect the possibilities for honest, reciprocating, and intelligible public debates (Rorty 1982, 165).

Honest accounts

We expect public accounts to be honest and not deceptive. Audiences expect that accounts will

faithfully report findings. They expect that data will not be ignored because it does not correspond to theoretical predictions. Because it is unacceptable intentionally to mislead or deceive audiences, it is likewise unacceptable to overlook or discount findings that remain anomalous from the perspective of our larger arguments. Researchers are guilty of fraud if we willfully alter or suppress relevant data.

Researchers need to be able honestly to note the limitations built into any particular research project and its outcomes. All correlations, for example, identify relations that are not certain but only at best more or less probable. Without necessarily having to translate our judgments into percentage points, researchers ought to attempt to indicate approximately how probable our findings are. One limitation that affects much research is the difficulty in gaining access to reliable sources of information about subject matters that interest us. We may, for example, want to relate the social history of a society but have available only official religious and political reports; birth, marriage, and death records; journals and letters from the largely well-to-do classes; and archaeology remains of many, but not all, dwellings and shrines. Some clever historians have been able to produce very full accounts of social life by both directly using and carefully drawing inferences from this kind of scattered data (see, e.g. Ladurie 1978; Boswell 1988). However, there are limits to what we can demonstrate and infer based upon the data available to us. Many histories have overlooked or given scant attention to the non-wealthy classes, to minorities, and to women in large part because available data sources included few written accounts by people from these groups.

Reciprocating accounts

Public accounts are expected to assume a reciprocating form. They are by nature addressed to others who are likely to both appreciate and critique them. Correlatively, others are expected not only to be given opportunity to voice their assessments but also to be respectively attended to and responded to in turn. Research reports themselves characteristically represent informed and reasoned responses to previous accounts. In this sense, research reports often constitute sustained, well-developed accounts which both stand by themselves yet also assume the form of one in a series of reciprocating presentations. All parties to these reciprocating exchanges are expected to abide by several normative standards. We are expected to attend to each other's presentations and not to misrepresent others. We are expected to meet the criticism of others with reasoned, empirically grounded arguments. Frequently, researchers develop our own positions and respond

to the criticisms of others not by directly addressing the latter's concerns but by devising new arguments for our own conclusions.

The reciprocating character of public accounts serves as a means of keeping social scientific studies honest. By means of public exchanges, social observers invite others to help them identify possible errors in our accounts. We implicitly welcome others to spot misperceptions, to track down misinterpretations, to locate questionable inferences, and to point to evidence which may have been overlooked. At the same time, as we produce our accounts, social scientists are also engaging in this same kind of critique of the accounts of others. As we engage in this public, reciprocating discourse, social scientists presume, first, that there are no methodologies or hermeneutics which are in principle error-free and, second, that there are no social observers who are not from time to time liable to overlook or misconstrue. In practice, of course, most social scientists attempt to guard themselves against these liabilities before we make our studies public. With diverse audiences in mind, we seek to address expected criticism from others, we check and double-check for oversights, and we often invite other colleagues to help us in this process. To be sure, at times certain "orthodoxies" within scholarly domains foreclose the breadth of collegial critique.

Interestingly, a number of social scientists are now making the data they have collected available online. In this way, they actively solicit the responses of other observers not only to their final prepared accounts but to the information they used to develop them.

Rational accounts

Public accounts are expected to be rational. Because the word "rational" is used with varied meanings, it is useful to spell out what we mean when we use this term. Rational accounts are public because by being intelligible and reasonable in ways I will explain, they allow and encourage others to comprehend, discuss, question, criticize, and support reports being presented. Rational accounts allow for full, interacting communications among people who may otherwise disagree or who may belong to quite distinct ideological and cultural traditions. If others, the diverse audiences to which public accounts are addressed, are to be able to understand and enter into reciprocating discussions of social scientific presentations, then these presentations must be intelligible and reasonable.

This view of rational accounts does not presume that social observers will use the same logics and agree upon the same epistemologies. Rather, this view presupposes that people will use different

modes and patterns of reasoning in keeping with specific philosophical, scientific, and cultural traditions. People often hold value-laden notions of rationality associated with particular assumptions about what counts as reliable knowledge. Disputants often fail to comprehend clearly the differences between them because they operate with subtle but decisive differences in their norms of rationality. McIntyre (1988) has explored how these differences have influenced traditional debates about justice and Schutz (1962) has investigated how these differences influenced attitudes toward causality. The view of rational accounts defended here allows for and assumes these differences.

If presentations are obfuscating, confused, convoluted, or garbled, then others cannot decipher or make sense of what is really being said. To the degree that presentations become incomprehensible, genuine public communication becomes difficult, if not impossible. Presentations may become unintelligible in a number of ways. People may use specialized vocabularies and terms that are not easily recognized by others investigating the same phenomena. As researchers, we may employ private references and allusions not familiar to the larger public. We may fail to order and arrange our evidence and arguments in ways that can be easily followed by interested critics and colleagues. We may use terms capable of multiple meanings, terms like “class,” “religion,” “justice,” and “development,” without clearly stipulating how we understand these words and phrases.

Social scientific accounts are rational as well insofar as they are reasonable. To be reasonable means, at least minimally, being able to marshal credible reasons. In the case of the social sciences, accounts are reasonable insofar as all assertions, conclusions, and judgments, all statements of correlations and causal connections are supported both by relevant evidence and by fully articulated reasons. It is necessary to underline this last point. Social scientific propositions are not demonstrated merely by producing corroborating evidence. Conclusions are not proven by only pointing to supporting statistical correlations. Relevant empirical evidence must be supported by arguments or reasons which explain how the posited correlations work and why they are significant. Weber (1978, Part I, Chap 1) argued that causal correlations that were statistically very high remained in principle incomprehensible unless it was possible to explain how and why these correlations occurred. This point needs to be reiterated because of the wide-spread tendency to count statements regarding causes and correlations as valid if corresponding statistical tests can be met. These statements become reasonable and sensible only to

the degree that it is possible to offer plausible explanations for why these causal and correlative relations occur.

In practice, valid social scientific observations and explanations must be falsifiable. This is the reverse way of saying they must be verifiable. Reports cannot be verified unless it is possible that the tests or observations used to support them might also lead to their non-verification or falsification. Accounts are falsifiable to the degree that it is possible to identify changes in conditions that would thereby render observations and explanations untrue or undemonstrated. It must be possible to identify the empirical condition necessary to prove or falsify any other statements of causal connections or correlations.

Objectivity in the gathering and interpreting of data

Three normative standards for gathering and analyzing social scientific data are entailed by the basic principle that objective accounts ought to be public.

First, researchers ought to represent faithfully the evidence they have gathered. The public audiences of social scientific reports expect to be given reliable accounts of evidence, so that they can make up their own minds and can either thoughtfully agree with the interpretations and conclusions offered or thoughtfully explore other ways of construing the same data. The critical task here is to represent the collected evidence faithfully.

If we are to represent the evidence of our research faithfully, researchers must seek to avoid or limit the extent to which we either, on the one hand, overlook or discount as irrelevant evidence which remains germane or, on the other hand, overly reduce these phenomena to our own categories of analysis. Thus, in order to avoid overlooking relevant information, researchers are forewarned to take nothing for granted. Conventional wisdom is often an unreliable guide. It often leads observers to look at subject matter from the perspective of particularly self-interested parties. I reviewed the problem of reductionism earlier on in this article. One of the checks against excessive reductionism is the counsel that researchers must always seriously consider and take into account the interpretations of those whom we are studying. From this perspective, as articulated by those directly involved, the viewpoints embedded in conventional wisdom need as well to be consulted and accounted for.

Second, if we are to be objective observers and analysts, social scientists ought to interpret and order their data in relation to terms and measures that allow for comparative assessments. If we are to

report our research publicly, then researchers must do so in ways that allow our diverse audiences to weigh and gauge our presentations in relation to standards that our audiences can also utilize. In order to respond to research accounts intelligently, audiences must be able to measure, to calibrate, or to compare reported findings in relation to data with which they are already familiar. These comparisons may assume diverse forms. The readers of reports may wish to compare historical events, ritual practices, or governmental initiatives. They may wish to see the relationship between demographic findings or different social protests. They may wish to know how Mead's account of Samoan family patterns compares with Levi-Strauss' theory of kinship structures. Depending on the basic concepts and terms of reference we employ, researchers may prepare reports that either readily allow for comparisons or make any attempts to measure or compare difficult, if possible at all. Sometimes, well-described cases studies, like Geertz' study of a cockfight or Bellah's account of civil religion in the United States, readily allow for and invite comparisons even when no overt comparisons are overtly referred to.

As I have already observed, measures and terms of reference may allow for public comparisons without necessarily having to be calibrated in numeric terms and without necessarily having to be simple reflections of empirical realities. Numeric measures do allow for easy comparisons of phenomena insofar as it is possible to gauge some aspects of social realities in relation to them. It is possible, for example, to compare income levels and response rates to similar questions on opinion polls. Other generic concepts designed especially to reflect observed realities – I am thinking of notions referring to birth order or gender – allow for comparisons because they can be easily invoked and applied to certain types of phenomena. However, comparisons can as well be made using concepts heuristically. That is, comparisons can be made in reference to non-numeric standards which are set forth not because they reflect realities but because they facilitate analyses and comparisons. When Weber proposed analyzing human actions in terms of whether they were instrumentally rational, value rational, affectional, or traditional he was not arguing that all action could fit into one of these types. Rather, he proposed these categories as independent measures against which any human action could be approximately gauged. Whether the terms of reference are numeric, real, or only nominal, the key factor in all cases is to be able to identify discrete dimensions along which variations can be measured in relation to intervals that seem significant and observable.

Finally, researchers are objective insofar as we exercise good judgment as we gather and interpret our data. I can indicate what I mean by exercising good judgment and why this standard serves as an operational guideline for objectivity by beginning to inquire what the audiences of research reports legitimately expect and then examining the implications of these expectations for how researchers ought to collect and analyze our observations. The diverse audiences which constitute the public for research reports expect to be able to assess the findings of social scientists independently. They can only do so to the degree that researchers indicate clearly how we arrived at our conclusions. The accounts of our research will seem comprehensible and credible to the degree that the steps taken in gathering and interpreting data seem intelligible and reasonable.

Two factors are especially critical. The first of these corresponds to the principle of reasonableness: researchers are expected to show how they arrived at their conclusions. Researchers are objective insofar as we do this. We allow audiences to examine how we selected representative data, how we organized findings, how we interpreted these observations, and how we reached our conclusions. To the degree that researchers are less than explicit about any of these ways in which we exercise judgment, our reports are likely to seem arbitrary, possibly biased, and more like personal commentary than social scientific research. Furthermore, audiences are likely to find our accounts arbitrary, one-sided, or subjective to the degree that researchers are not able to provide good reasons for how we exercised discretion. The exercise of good judgment is not tied to the adoption of particular research strategies or modes of interpretation. Rather, judgments become reasonable in the sense I am using the term here, and thereby objective, to the degree that researchers clearly think through alternatives and are able to provide clear and intelligible explanations for our choices.

The second factor critical to the making of good judgments turns on the recognition that researchers often make quite different kinds of judgments. As we gather, interpret, and draw conclusions, researchers may be led in varying degrees to make not only judgments about what empirically exists but also evaluative assessments about the value, goodness, or rightness of what we are observing and reporting on. Whether we refer to this difference as the distinction between judgments of reality and judgments of value (Durkheim 1974, Essay IV) or as the distinction between judgments of facts and judgments of value (Weber 1949b), this distinction is both real and significant. The latter involve attempts to evaluate or to determine the goodness, rightness,

or worthiness of persons, activities, or social phenomena in relation to normative standards regarding what is good, right, and worthy. The diverse audiences of social scientific reports can legitimately expect to be informed when and to the degree that the decisions made by researchers are influenced by the latter's value or reality judgments.

A considerable amount of misunderstanding exists with respect to this point that social scientific research may at times be influenced by the value judgments of researchers. Weber acknowledged that researchers typically proceed with certain value orientations, which influence both what kinds of topics they consider to be worth investigating as well as the particular approaches they undertake with these studies. He undertook a number of comparative studies in order to examine the degree to which different cultural traditions either fostered or impeded what he referred to as the "Spirit of Capitalism." While some scholars may conduct social scientific research simply because they wish to advance the stock of human knowledge, in most cases scholars pursue their investigations with various value-shaped interests: they wish to address questions, explore issues, vindicate points of view, and/or expose errors.

Value judgments may appropriately influence the conduct of social scientific research in at least three ways. First, they may shape the choice of topics we choose to examine. Because of other commitments, we may choose to investigate the causes of poverty, the development of popular culture, the changing public roles of women, or variations in family rituals. Second, we may as well make evaluative judgments about the people, associations, and events we are studying. So long as we give reasons for our judgments, we may from time to time describe particular subjects as being deceptive, power-hungry, courageous, or fair-minded. Again so long as we provide bases for our judgments, we may likewise characterize associations as being duplicit, just, oppressive, or charitable. Finally, we may well be conducting and reporting on our research in part motivated by value commitments regarding a wide range of value-shaped issues from the status of indigenous peoples, the growing inequality in wealth, the evidence of expanding political disenchantment, or the increases in what Case and Deaton (2020) refer to as "deaths of despair." While researchers understandably are influenced by value commitments, we are also expected both to be overt about these commitments. In all these several ways, researchers make value judgments that guide and shape our investigations. However, in each case we are counseled to distinguish these kinds of evaluative assessments from our empirical judgments.

The real issue here does not turn on whether social investigators should exercise both judgments of reality and judgments of value in our work. Nor does the issue really revolve around whether one sort of judgment can and should influence the other sort. They obviously can and do. However, I think we should go one step further and assert that even though the judgments we make with respect to reality and value sometimes quite appropriately influence each other, these different types of judgments ought not to contaminate each other. That is, their influence should be overt not covert, openly acknowledged not tacitly presumed. In so far as possible, we should not substitute one kind of judgment for the other, either intentionally or more likely, unwittingly. Occasionally researchers do just this. Because of our ideological predilections, we overlook or discount disconfirming information. We highlight evidence that supports our larger value-laden arguments but gives scant attention to observations the run counter to them. The basic principle here does not rule out value judgments in social scientific research: rather, it calls for a clear distinction between the two. It argues that good reasons need to be supplied for both. It further allows value judgments to influence choices of topics, assessments of persons and their interactions, as well as assessments of the value of subjects' own accounts. However, this principle draws a clear line against any ways of proceeding that allow researchers to confuse and conflate our exercises of judgments with respect to what is and with respect to what ought to be.

Conclusion

A number of observers have criticized objectivity as an appropriate norm for social scientific research. They have done so for the most part because they have assumed, I think wrongly, that objectivity was defined by a number of criteria which I have argued are inappropriate, impossible, or overly narrow. I reviewed these standards in the first part of this article.

I have proposed an alternative view of objectivity as a norm for social scientific investigations. I have argued that this norm preeminently concerns how social scientists report on our research. Our reports are objective to the degree that they are genuinely public: that is, addressed to diverse audiences constituted by persons who are likely to be both supportive and critical, known, and unknown, but who legitimately expect these accounts to be honest, intelligible, and reasonable and expect as well that their comments will be attended to and responded to. Objectivity, viewed from this perspective, is a

civic virtue. Social scientific accounts become less or other than objective to the degree that they become private or privileged reports, to the degree that they become either incomprehensible or unreasonable in the way I have used this term, and to the degree they do not welcome and stand ready to respond to reasonable criticisms. The norm of objectivity allows for and requires public accounts.

In addition, precisely because social scientists are expected to provide these kinds of public accounts, we are correspondingly expected to gather and interpret our observations in keeping with several further guidelines for objectivity in the conduct of our research. These guidelines concern three generic aspects of social scientific investigations: namely, how to represent the subjects of research, what kinds of measures to use, and how researchers should proceed in order to make responsible judgments. In relation to each of these concerns, the appropriate guideline for objectively valid research are those which make possible the kinds of accounts which the diverse public audiences of this research can legitimately expect.

The norm of objectivity, rightly understood, assumes social scientific research to be a doubly dialogical activity. Researchers undertake this research in on-going conversation both with the subjects and with audiences of our research. Both interactions are expected in principle to be reciprocating so that subjects can indicate to what degree they think they are well or not so well represented and audiences can indicate to what extent their questions, criticisms, and concerns have been addressed. Sometimes, these conversation with subjects occur hypothetically or imaginatively because subjects are now dead or incapacitated, or because as subjects of demographic studies they are too numerous, or for other reasons they are not in a position to respond. Still, in principle researchers are expected to find ways to see how we think subjects would view our accounts.

This interpretation of the norm of objectivity as a civic virtue may seem novel. In a fundamental sense, it is not. Slightly over a century ago, in 1905, Weber published an essay on "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy," in which he outlined a position which is very close to the one I have just defended. Some years later, in 1917, in the midst of the First World War, he wrote another essay on "Ethical Neutrality in Sociology and Economics," in which he continued to defend a position very similar to the one set forth here. Weber has sometimes been interpreted as taking a position on objectivity quite different than this. He has been occasionally invoked as a defender of disinterested, positivist social science. The title of the second essay has often

been cited to criticize or defend the view that social scientific research ought to be conducted for the sake of knowledge alone and that value judgments and concerns ought to be excluded from valid research. These positivist interpretations grossly misrepresent Weber's basic position.

Weber (1949a, 51, 1949b, 9) argued that it is necessary and useful to distinguish between judgments of fact and logic and judgments of value even though no absolutely clear line could be drawn between them. There is, he maintained, a fundamental difference between understanding and approving; the one does not necessarily entail the other. It was a mistake to assume that one could derive justifiable value judgments merely by making judgments about what is. Weber especially criticized those who assumed that they could defend ethical views by identifying either short-term or long-term trends. In making this statement, Weber criticized the way social Darwinists, Marxists, and Hegelians invoked their interpretation of social trends in order to justify moral views. The ethical positions adopted in each of these cases were not dictated simply by determining what were the relevant empirical realities. In each of these cases, eventual moral positions were influenced both by judgments of reality and judgments of value. Weber called for social scientists to distinguish between these two kinds of judgments partly because he expected them to conduct their investigation with candor. He assumed that investigators would inherently be influenced by value commitments and concerns both in the topics they chose to research, in the questions they sought to address, and in the selection and formulation of hypotheses they choose to consider. Weber argued that investigations would be more reliable to the degree that researchers were candid about these value judgments. He scoffed at the attempt of investigators to be neutral by attempting to represent both sides of particular policy debates. Their role, Weber asserted, was not simply passively to represent the views of disparate partisans. Rather, their responsibility was to undertake rigorous analysis in which they attempted to identify the presuppositions and likely consequences of differing views, to analyze internal inconsistencies – whether means and ends were proportionate or not, and to situate particular phenomena in larger historical and comparative frames of reference.

Weber argued strongly against the view that the concepts and terms of the social sciences ought to strictly reflect empirical realities. Rather, he observed the way social sciences typically and deliberately abstracted from reality when they developed their terms of reference. Often, the terms used by economists, sociologists, and historians tended to

accentuate certain traits in order to call attention to characteristic features of what they were observing. Investigators used concepts like “sect,” the “state,” and “social class” to highlight characteristic features. Weber observed that well-defined concepts often served like hypotheses to clarify issues, direct useful research, and facilitate analyses. From his perspective, the basic terms of reference were to be used heuristically in order to facilitate comparative analyses.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians debated over whether the practice of writing histories was an art or a natural science. Weber composed his essay on objectivity because he assumed that the social or cultural sciences occupied a place in the middle, between these opposites. The social sciences were similar in ways both to the arts and the natural sciences but were reducible to neither. The norm of objectivity, rightly understood, provides a space for the social sciences. The positivists, interpreting this norm in a very constricted way, attempt to turn history and the social sciences into a natural science. Contemporary anti-positivists, reacting against the norm of objectivity wrongly understood, attempt to turn history and the social sciences into personal narratives. “If we get rid of traditional notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘scientific method,’” Rorty (1982, 303) writes, “we shall be able to see the social sciences as continuous with literature... as [a means of] interpreting other people to us.” The purpose of this article, as with Weber’s earlier treatise, has been to map out a viable position between these opposites, which allows for and defends the social sciences as autonomous disciplines, committed to the norm of objectivity rightly understood and characterized by public discourse.

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