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Mark Risjord. **Philosophy of Social Science.**

A Contemporary Introduction. Serie: Routledge

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BOOKS

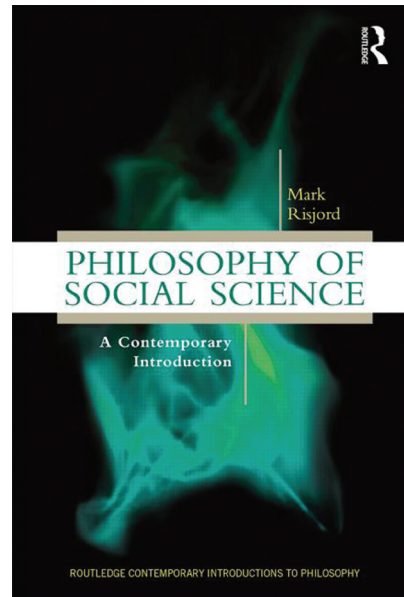
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PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

As part of the authoritative series "Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy", Mark Risjord has published his fascinating volume entitled "Philosophy of Social Science". The book's subtitle, "A Contemporary Introduction" is fully justified: the book is comprehensive, clear and full of striking and judiciously chosen contemporary examples from the social sciences. However, it is neither an introduction to nor an overview of social philosophy.

Since Descartes laid the foundation for a philosophical form of individualism Social Philosophy



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has found itself in a difficult position. This philosophical individualism has become the yardstick for politics (John Locke) and education (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) as well as for economy (Adam Smith).

This philosophical premise, or bias if you prefer, still holds the current debate under its spell. The cow is only happy as part of a herd and individual action is not forthcoming. Human beings, by contrast, are obviously driven by egocentric motives and altruism. It must be possible to explain why action is taken, or why an individual goes the extra mile for someone else.

In traditional continental European social philosophy, an attempt is usually first made to describe the discovery of a sort of social facticity within mankind. This is followed by the problems concerning social determinism and contradictions between the individual and the community.

These attempts are, perhaps fortunately, absent from Risjord's book. It is not an overview of tidbits and trivia, but a penetrating exposé of problems and methods.

Young students will probably find this a challenging text, if only because of the many current issues that are raised. For example, probing reflections on aggression and violence are explained in terms of the problems and opportunities in the frequent use of video games.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of debates within the social sciences. Please note that these are debates and controversies, not fixed opinions. The author focuses on up-to-date research programmes within the social sciences. Through in-depth analysis of these research problems, the author reaches the philosophical issues underlying them or that provide their motivation.

A wide range of issues are addressed: the relationship between social policy and social science, interpretive research, action explanation, game theory, social scientific accounts of norms, joint intentionality, reductionism, causal modelling, case study research, and experimentation. It is a rich and comprehensive book. Each of the ten chapters ends with a convenient "Chapter Summary", "Discussion Questions" and a list of "Further Reading".

It is apparent from the outset that this is a compelling book. It is certainly not a dry textbook, written, as it is, in a challenging and readable style. To start with, even when collecting the simplest data, people simply do not line up to be counted. It turns out that "counting people" is a tricky business.

Well-chosen examples are given and the reader is guided towards the problems of the values that lie behind every (at first glance) simple choice. This is followed by arguments on value freedom and impartial research. The ensuing discussion ends, rather paradoxically, with the position put forward by Wylie and Nelson: "science is objective because of the values with which it is infused".

The following quotation indicates the compelling and provocative manner in which the author describes the issues raised, and how he manages to clarify many theoretical concepts with carefully chosen examples. In this quotation he makes clear the importance of interpretation and context: "If I were to say, 'That is an incoherent statement' to my daughter over breakfast, it would be taken as aggressive; it was unnecessarily harsh and argumentative. If I say the same thing later in the day while talking to my colleague philosophy, it may be understood as an unremarkable moment or intellectual give-and-take" (p. 43).

Aggressiveness is not a thing or fact but depends on how it is given meaning and the context in which it occurs. This brings the author to the philosophical opposition between "Verstehen", hermeneutics and description versus forms of realism and the construction of social reality.

This reveals one weakness of the book. Hermeneutics is understood in the manner of Max Weber in the 1920s. Modern authors such as Hans-Georg Gadamer are missing. It is through the work of Charles Taylor that Risjord has access to philosophy written in French and German. All references made by him only include works written in English, with the result that indispensable authorities such as Michel Foucault are conspicuous by their absence.

Particularly enlightening are the discussions by, for instance, Peter Winch on relativism and rationality in "Understanding a Primitive Society", or the problems formulated by Carl Hempel concerning *Action and Agency* and brilliantly illustrated by Risjord's reference to the sinking of a battleship.

When, later in his discourse, the author attempts to provide a clearer explanation of the concept of "Verstehen", he falls back on outdated literature, such as that of Collingwood. This is a pity because he adds a nice series of examples about "The Games People Play".

Many interesting examples are provided of the strategies we use in playing chess or how we choose between buttermilk and coca cola, right down to the sinking of the battleship Bismarck.

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Judging by the many lines that I underscored while reading the sixth chapter, it taught me a great deal. It deals with “reductionism”. A typical nineteenth-century phenomenon: everything can be traced back to this (economy, Karl Marx) or that (evolution, Charles Darwin). They are forms of holism, which are caustically described by Risjord as “methodological localism” (p. 128).

The chapter on “Social Norms” – again packed with challenging examples – is based on the idea that sociology begins by disenchanting the world. We can once again discern the ideas of Max Weber: “Entzauberung der Welt”. But Risjord goes further: “and it proceeds by disenchanting itself”. This leads to the “Is and Ought” discussion, in this case derived from David Hume, ignoring the extension of this view into “Sein und Sollen” by Immanuel Kant.

However, Kant is quoted in the chapter on “causality and law”, with his sensible opinion that rational people would never vote to bring the miseries of war upon their country. That would indeed be very unwise but it is what has often happened. In the subsequent discussions on “models and mechanisms” logical formulae are used that are rather difficult to understand.

Nevertheless, this book is very useful for both teachers and students alike.