

THE NATURE OF SCIENCE*

Roger TRIGG**

Abstract. The study defines social science and its specific in contrast with history, psychology and physical sciences. Also it emphasizes the importance of the idea of a 'value-free' science for the social sciences is clear. Social scientists want to be seen to establish 'facts' about society in the same way that they think that a physicist or a chemist uncovers 'facts'. Using the theories of Hempel, Quine, Feyerabend and Kuhn, it addresses a series of questions concerning scientific theories, their roles for the scientific explanation and the scientific progress.

Keywords: social science, empiricism, theory, explanation, scientific progress.

Empiricism

What is social science? This is a characteristically philosophical question, examining the assumptions and presuppositions of an area of human activity. It seems easy to give a list of would-be social sciences. Sociology and social anthropology would inevitably be on it, as would such subjects as politics and economics. History has a claim to be there too, although it is often not thought of as a social science. It certainly studies the interactions of humans in society. The main difference between it and the others is that it confines itself to the past. Psychology, even social psychology, should probably not be there as it concentrates on the individual rather than on his or her place in the wider group.

It is already obvious that the notion of social science is not as clear-cut as might be first imagined. Most people would accept psychology as a science, but would wonder about its qualifications as a *social* one. History deals with societies, as well as individuals, but perhaps it is often more like literature, and ought not to be classified as a science. Its imaginative reconstruction of individuals' motives may sometimes appear more like writing a novel than like the repeated experiments of a chemist in a laboratory.

All this assumes that 'social' qualifies 'science' in the same way that 'physical' or 'natural' do. A contrast is often drawn between physical and social sciences which takes it for granted that both sets of disciplines are sciences. Physicists study the natural world while sociologists study the social world. It would follow

* Ch. I „Understanding Social Sciences”, Blackwell Publisher, Oxford, UK, 1993, pp. 1-22.

** Professor PhD, Warwick University, President of „Mind” Association.